



Biggles

AND THE POOR RICH BOY



**CAPTAIN
W.E. JOHNS**



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CHAPTER 1



CHAPTER 1

A CROOK TAKES REVENGE

THERE was a knock on the door of the Air Police Headquarters at Scotland Yard; it was opened a little way and a face wearing a broad smile appeared in the aperture. 'Howdy!' said a voice.

Biggles, looking up from the desk where he had been working, returned the smile and sprang to his feet, hand outstretched. 'Well, stiffen the crows! Look who's here! Come in, Eddie. What sort of wind blew you to this side of the Atlantic?'

'I wouldn't call it a fair one.' Eddie Ross, United States member of the International Police Bureau, shook hands all round. Immaculate, keen-eyed, with crew-cut hair and a slim cigar between his teeth, he accepted the chair Police Pilot Algy Lacey pulled out for him.

'Still trailing dope runners?' suggested Biggles, lightly.

'Not this time. I guess the knock we gave 'em has either put 'em out of business or driven 'em underground to think things over.' ¹

'You didn't come all this way just to say howdy.'

'Sure didn't. I'm looking for a boy named Carlo Salvatore. Ever heard of him?'

'No.'

‘He’s the son of Rosario Salvatore.’

‘The name means nothing to me.’

‘He’s a multi-millionaire.’

‘You don’t expect me to know the names of all your millionaires. Have a cup of tea?’

‘Say, don’t you guys ever stop pouring tea down your necks?’

‘Not very often. Only when we can’t get it. Sorry I’ve nothing stronger in the office.’

‘That’s okay. I never touch hard liquor when I’m working.’

‘What about this boy? What’s he done?’

‘It’s generally reckoned he’s been kidnapped, but I have a hunch he was more than ready to slip his bridle.’

‘And you think he may have come over this side?’

‘That’s how I figure it.’

‘How can we help?’

‘That’s what I’ve come to talk about.’

‘Go ahead. Give us the facts and we’ll see what we can do.’

‘Okay. Here they are. This lost kid, Carlo, is twelve, and the only son of Rosario Salvatore, the Texas oil tycoon. One of the richest men in the States — or anywhere else for that matter. Young Carlo’s ma died about the time he could toddle, so as you can imagine he means more to the old man than all his millions. Well, the kid’s gone. The old man has offered a million dollars for his return and no questions asked. So far there’s been no answer and in my opinion there never will be.’

‘Money is a strong argument.’

‘There are some things stronger.’

‘Such as?’

‘Hate. Revenge.’

‘So that’s how it is.’

‘That’s just how it is. Now I’ll start right at the beginning.’

‘Speaking of revenge, are you sure the boy hasn’t been murdered?’

‘I doubt it.’

‘Why?’

‘Because the man who’s got the boy can go on gloating over his father. If he kills him that’s the finish.’

‘You may have something there. Give us the background.’

‘Here it is, and it’s fairly simple. Some twenty-odd years ago three friends, Italians, emigrated to the United States. They were twin brothers named Antonio and Cesare Paola, and Rosario Salvatore. They had been born about the same time in the same village, in Sicily, and had therefore known each other all their lives. There was also a girl — but she comes into the story later. As soon as the boys were old enough, and had saved enough money, they decided to try their luck in the States. Soon after they had arrived the Paolas took the crooked path to an easy fortune, as they thought, by getting in with

one of our gangster outfits. Rosario had more sense. He went straight, made money, and, of course, would have nothing more to do with his old pals.'

'I suppose they didn't like that.'

'No doubt they were jealous. But the trouble really started when the twins were involved in the brutal murder of a cop. They were picked up, and from the prison where they were awaiting trial appealed to Rosario to help them.'

'How did they think he could do that?'

'I don't know. Perhaps they thought he could use his influence to get them bail and put up the money for it. Maybe they thought he'd hire the best lawyers in the country to defend them when they came up for trial. Rosario, understandably, refused to have anything to do with the business. After all, he was then a man in a responsible position and wouldn't want to be associated with a gang of thugs. He as good as told the brothers that as they'd made their own beds they'd have to lie on 'em as far as he was concerned. The upshot of that was, Antonio, who had done the actual shooting, went to the electric chair. Cesare got ten years in the pen, a sentence that was extended after an attempt to escape. Why he should blame Rosario for what he'd done I don't know, but he swore to be revenged for Antonio's death.'

'That was a bit tough on Rosario.'

'It sure was. But there's more to come. Shortly after this affair a girl the three of them had known at home arrived on the scene. It appears that Cesare had paid her passage out with the intention of marrying her. She arrived with practically no money and knowing nothing of what had happened. Unable to find either Antonio or Cesare she went to Rosario and asked him where they were. He had to tell her the truth. Antonio had been executed and Cesare was doing a ten year stretch. If he hadn't told her she'd have found out. Seeing how she was fixed he gave her some money to carry on with, and to make a long story short a few months later he married her. When Cesare, in prison, heard of this, he nearly went out of his mind with fury. He swore a blood oath to get even with the pair of them.'

'What did he expect the wretched girl to do—sit around for ten years waiting for him, a convicted crook?'

'Search me. That's how it was. Anyhow, the girl escaped Cesare's vengeance by dying soon after the boy, Carlo, was born. That, of course, made the lad doubly precious. Well, the years rolled on. Cesare served his time and was discharged. Rosario sat back and waited for him to strike. To an Italian a blood feud is something, and Rosario, being an Italian himself, knew that better than most people. He told me, when I saw him, that he himself expected to be murdered; but there was always a chance that Cesare would strike at him through the boy. And that's what did happen. With a chance of Cesare breaking prison young Carlo had always been guarded like a crown prince. Now, with Cesare running loose, precautions against attack were doubled. In that the boy's unfortunate father may have done more harm than good.'

‘How so?’

‘I’ll come to that in a minute.’

‘Did Rosario know where Cesare had gone when he left prison?’

‘No. We may suppose Cesare dropped out of sight in the underworld. He had had plenty of time in prison to make his plans. They worked only too well. He got the boy, and he’s sworn that his father will never see him again. There’s no doubt he’d sooner murder the poor kid rather than let him go back home. As I’ve said, Rosario offered a million dollars for his return, but Cesare didn’t bite.’

‘What did you mean when you said the precautions Rosario had taken might have done more harm than good?’

‘I have a feeling that the poor little rich boy might have been glad to leave home, to go with Cesare.’

‘That’s a queer notion. How do you work that out?’

‘By thinking about the way the boy was taken and a few loose ends I’ve picked up since. Just consider the life the poor little guy led. Always surrounded by gun-totin’ bodyguards he was practically kept in a cage. He wasn’t allowed to go out, much less go to school. The house he lived in was barred and bolted like a prison. He missed all the fun other kids have. He had no friends. For all his father’s millions he could have got no pleasure out of life. He spent most of his life sitting in a room, with bullet proof glass windows, reading. You see what I’m getting at?’

‘You think the boy might have been glad to escape from this confinement.’

‘Yes, if Cesare treated him well.’

‘You’re sure the boy hasn’t been murdered?’

‘We can’t be certain; but surely if Cesare had simply wanted to kill the kid he could have done it on the spot instead of taking him away.’

‘How did he do that?’

‘In the one way that had never been considered. He got him by using an airplane. That’s why I was brought into the case. I must explain that the boy, apart from reading, which was more or less forced on him, had two interests in life. One was flying and the other fishing. He wasn’t allowed to get in a plane, of course — I mean a real plane. He was crazy to fly, but pop said, no; it was too dangerous. All the kid could do was fill his room with models and books on flying. I’ve seen that room. Carlo must have read every book on flying ever written; and that’s as near to flying as he ever got. I think the old man carried this sort of thing too far, and, as I say, it might have defeated his object.’

‘How?’

‘It was inevitable that stories of how the boy was cooped up should leak out. Reporters weren’t allowed near, but that didn’t prevent hints being thrown out by the newspapers. Cesare would be pretty certain to see those, and as you’ll understand in a minute those reports may have given him ideas.’

‘What about the fishing? Was the boy allowed to fish?’

‘Yes, within strict limits. And here again, remember what I said about playing into Cesare’s hands.’

‘I don’t quite follow you,’ murmured Biggles.

‘You will when I’ve explained the set-up. It can hardly be coincidence that Cesare’s scheme for the kidnapping involved both flying and fishing. Now about this fishing. Rosario Salvatore, the boy’s father, had a big country estate in Kansas. That’s where he usually lived. The boy never left the place. In the grounds of the estate there’s a lake of some size. Actually, the house overlooks it. This lake was stocked with trout for the boy to catch. He didn’t fish from the bank partly because it’s much overgrown with trees and scrub which would have made it difficult to cast a line, and partly because of some rather dangerous pot-holes. So the boy fished from a flat-bottomed boat, specially built for the job and reckoned to be unsinkable. For the rest, a fishing expedition was conducted on the lines of a royal occasion. First the lake was surrounded and patrolled by guards armed with rifles. No one could get near it. Watching the boy from a pier was an expert swimmer with a fast motor-boat. The idea of that was to rescue the boy should he fall overboard. Pop was taking no chances of an accidental drowning, even though the boy could swim. No other boat was allowed on the lake and no one else was allowed to fish.’

‘Tell me this,’ requested Biggles. ‘Was the boy told why all these fantastic arrangements were considered necessary?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘It was thought if he knew the facts, that his life was always in danger, it might affect his nerves.’

‘Was he the nervous type?’

‘No; as far as I can make out he was a perfectly normal healthy lad; and that being so he chafed at being kept on a lead like a prize pup at a dog show. There’s a rumour that more than once he tried to escape; but he hadn’t a hope. Eyes were on him night and day. He was told that one day he would inherit his father’s millions and for that reason had to be taken care of.’

‘Poor little blighter,’ sighed Bertie.

‘What a life,’ muttered Ginger.

‘Yet in spite of it all Cesare got him,’ resumed Eddie.

‘This is getting interesting,’ said Biggles. ‘How did it happen?’

‘It was really very simple. I’ll give you the bare facts of how it was done, although here we’re involved in a certain amount of conjecture. The boy went fishing as usual. It was a fine day. Carlo sat in his boat in the middle of the lake which was about half a mile long and a quarter of a mile wide. Suddenly out of the blue comes a light plane, an amphibian, blipping its motor like it was in trouble. At first the guards thought nothing of it, but when the motor cut out and the crate started gliding down to land — well, you can imagine the flap. Carlo stood up to watch. The guards on the bank could do nothing. The

only man who might have done something was the guy in the rescue launch, but, as he said afterwards, he was afraid of colliding with the plane. So he did nothing.'

'I can understand that,' said Biggles.

'Of course, up to this point nobody was thinking of an attempted abduction. It was assumed the plane was in trouble and merely trying to get down. That, no doubt, was what the pilot intended people to think when he blipped his motor. But when it landed, and ran straight on to the boat, it was a different matter. But still the guards on the bank could do nothing. They daren't shoot for fear of hitting the boy, who by this time was standing with his hands resting on the plane talking to the pilot. This came as a relief to most of the watchers who had expected to see the boy shot. What sort of conversation took place between the boy and the pilot we don't know, but the next thing the guards saw was young Carlo getting into the spare seat of the plane.'

'No force was used?'

'None. The boy appeared to get in willingly. By now the rescue launch was tearing across the water; but it was too late. The plane took off, and that's the last that's been seen of Carlo Salvatore. A point worth noting is, as the plane passed over the rescue launch Carlo looked down and waved to the man at the wheel.'

'Meaning Carlo was enjoying himself.'

'What else are we to think?'

'What happened next?'

'You can imagine the panic. Telephones and radio buzzed as the police of every state were alerted to watch for a blue-painted two-seater amphibian.'

Biggles looked surprised. 'But surely the type of machine is known?'

'Nobody recognized it. Of all those guards there wasn't one who could tell one ship from another.'

'What about the registration letters? They must have got those!'

'Believe it or not, in the general stampede nobody thought to look at 'em.'

Biggles shook his head sadly.

'Ironically, the only one who would have recognized the type was the boy who flew away in it.'

'Are you sure the job was done by Cesare?'

'Either by him, personally, or by someone employed by him. Had it been anyone else, an ordinary kidnapping, a demand for ransom money would have been in by now. This happened three weeks ago.'

'Can Cesare fly an aircraft?'

'Not as far as we know. But with this job in view he might have had himself taught to fly since he came out of gaol. That's being checked now; but we don't set much store on it because Cesare has probably changed his name. I've been working on that myself, flying all over the country. Like I said, that's why I was given the assignment.'

'Have you found the plane?'

'No.'

'Then what brings you here? It could hardly have flown the Atlantic.'

'I'm coming to that. The general belief in the States is that the crate made straight for the border, either Mexico or Canada, and it may have done that. During the two weeks I was flying round our airfields, trying to find out if the machine had landed anywhere for fuel, I had plenty of time to think.'

'But the machine must have landed somewhere. It wouldn't be likely to have a fuel capacity to reach either Mexico or Canada.'

'I agree. But knowing what he was going to do there was nothing to prevent Cesare having a secret dump of petrol somewhere. We've plenty of wild, wide open spaces, where that might be done.'

Biggles nodded understanding. 'True enough.'

'One thing's certain; knowing that in a matter of hours every cop in the States, not to mention the Air Corps, would be on the look-out for him, Cesare would make flat out for the border. Anyhow, that's what I think, although not everyone agrees with me. There's another theory that Cesare might not have gone far. He might have abandoned the machine and hidden it by running it over the edge of some canyon, in Texas, for instance, where it might lie for a long time without being found. It's no distance from Kansas to Texas, or New Mexico. Having done that, taking the boy with him, he would then lie low either in the remote country or in the slums of one of the cities.'

'You don't hold with that theory?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Because that wouldn't suit the boy. He'd try to get away.'

'But wouldn't he do that in any case?'

'Not as I see it.'

'How *do* you see it?'

'Taking all the known facts into account, like this. The boy was willing to get in the plane. After all, this was his chance to do what he had long wanted to do, have a flight in a real ship. What did Cesare say to him after he had landed? He might have said: "You like flying, eh? You come with me. We do plenty of flying, with lots of fun. Get aboard, kid. Let's go places." From what I've learned of Carlo I'd say he'd jump at the chance. Wouldn't you, after being cooped up all your life?'

'Yes, there's something in that,' agreed Biggles.

'And provided Cesare did the generous uncle stuff, giving the boy a good time, Carlo might be content to stay with him — for a while, anyway.'

'Yes, I see that. For such a frolic Cesare would need money. How would he be fixed for cash?'

'He probably had some tucked away. Don't forget he'd been a gangster in a big way for years. All these top gangsters make money. They have to.'

Biggles took a cigarette and tapped it thoughtfully on the desk. 'Kansas is

much nearer Mexico than it is to Canada. Of the two, if Cesare has in fact left the country, one would imagine him making for the nearest border.'

'I wouldn't.'

'Why not?'

'For the very reason that Cesare, being a professional crook, would figure that was what people *would* think. Therefore he'd go some place else.'

Biggles smiled. 'You may have something there. What does all this boil down to?'

'In my view the kid's alive. Had he been bumped off his father would have been told, to knock him flat. Remember, this is a case of revenge. I'd say the boy's staying with Cesare of his own free will. He's living, doing the things he wants to, for the first time in his life. I could find no trace of that plane crossing the Mexican frontier so I tried Canada, and there I picked up what may be a clue. Three days after the abduction, a man and boy answering fairly well to the description of those we're looking for, boarded a regular service plane bound for London. The boy wore dark glasses. It was said he was going to London for an eye operation by a specialist. Now you know why I'm here.'

'I see,' said Biggles, slowly. 'Under what names were this man and boy travelling?'

'According to the passenger list, which I saw, they were Mr Arturo Cornelli and his son Giovanni, Canadian citizens of Montreal. Notice the Italian names. That would be necessary because they both looked Italian — as in fact they were by birth. If that was Cesare Paolo and Carlo Salvatore they wouldn't be likely to use their own names. The first thing I did was check up on their home address in Montreal. There was no such place.'

'What about their passports? They couldn't travel without them.'

'Passports!' Eddie snorted. 'To get false passports would present no difficulty to a crook like Cesare. He'd know where to get them. Don't forget this whole plot must have been carefully thought out and everything prepared. Cesare may have taken weeks or even months over it.'

'So you think Cesare and the boy may now be over this side of the Atlantic?'

'I do.'

'Why should Cesare choose England?'

'Because that would be a stepping stone to anywhere in Europe—Italy, maybe.'

'And what do you want me to do about it?'

'Find this couple who came here under the names of Arturo and Giovanni Cornelli.'

'That may take a little while. The trail will be cold by now.'

'I'm in no hurry. I'm playing up a hunch. I may be wrong, but if I'm right it should put me on the list for promotion,' said Eddie, grinning, as he stubbed his cigar in the ash-tray. 'There's just one other thing,' he concluded. 'The boy's father, Rosario Salvatore, has offered a reward of a hundred thousand

dollars for information concerning his son, alive or dead.'

'Let's find the boy, never mind the money,' proposed Biggles, grimly.

¹ See *Biggles' Combined Operation*.

CHAPTER 2

LEAVE IT TO GASKIN

‘WELL, you’re on your own ground, what do you reckon’s my best way to go to work?’ asked Eddie, a trifle anxiously.

‘I take it you’ve come to me hoping I’ll lend a hand?’

‘Sure.’

‘Fine. Having settled that, how long do you intend to stay over this side?’

‘Until I’ve ascertained whether or not this guy who calls himself Cornelli is Cesare Paola.’

‘Does your boss know you’re here?’

‘Sure he does.’

‘Does he know exactly why you’re here?’

‘He knows I’m following up a clue. I’m to ring him from time to time to see if any news has come in over our side. I shall call him of course when I’ve seen Cornelli. If he isn’t Paola I go back home.’

‘It may be some time before you see him. To find him won’t be as easy as all that. This is a free country and we don’t keep a tab on visitors as they do in some places.’

‘I understand that.’

‘Very well. Then let’s start by assuming Cornelli is Cesare Paola. Then we can ask ourselves what he would be most likely to do when he got here? Of one thing we can be certain. If these two people, man and boy, left Canada by air in a London-bound aircraft then he must have arrived here, because there are no intermediate stops. That being so, there isn’t much point in confirming their arrival at London airport. But to identify them there is one line of approach we might try. Do you happen to have photographs of Cesare Paola and Carlo Salvatore?’

‘Right here in my wallet. I’ve a copy of the official prison mug-shot of Cesare and a snapshot of the boy taken a couple o’ years ago.’

‘Good. Ginger can take them to London airport for identification.’

Said Ginger: ‘The person most likely to be able to do that would be the air hostess who travelled in the machine.’

‘Try to find her. Failing that try the Customs people. At the same time you might check if they’ve left the country.’ Biggles turned back to Eddie.

‘Assuming they arrived it doesn’t necessarily mean they’re still here. They might have gone straight on, or within a day or two, bound for anywhere in Europe — or the world, for that matter. If they’re still in this country a routine police check should be able to locate them, although that’s a slogging business and may take a while. They would presumably stay at a hotel, and hotels have to keep a register of the arrival and departure of guests. The only snag about that is, as Cesare wouldn’t have to produce his passport he might

have changed his name again.'

'Yeah. He might do that.'

'We may be sure, wherever he's gone he'll do his best to cover up his trail. He may even lay false trails to baffle possible pursuits. What we must bear in mind is, Cornelli came here as a Canadian, which means as far as we're concerned he's a British subject. If, as I imagine, he speaks English with a trans-Atlantic accent, he'd have no difficulty in getting away with that. Maybe that's why, for his passport he chose to domicile himself in Canada.'

'What difference would that make?'

'A lot. As a British subject he could stay here indefinitely if he felt like it. As a foreigner he'd have to register. On the other hand, if, as a British subject, he went to any country in Europe, the same regulation would apply. If he went to France, for instance, even with a passport, at the end of three months he'd have to apply for an identity card, which means there would be a police record of him. But we can deal with this sort of thing later, should it arise.'

'You think he might have gone on to France?'

'He might have gone anywhere, but if you asked me to guess to which country he'd be most likely to make for, I'd say Italy, the reason being the language. Having had Italian parents, both Cesare and Carlo would be able to speak Italian.'

'That's a point I hadn't thought of,' admitted Eddie.

'By the same token, as they must both speak English, they might stay here — for a time, anyway. Let's hope that is the case, because it would simplify matters considerably. Supposing they're still here, the question arises, where would they be most likely to go?'

'What would you say to that?'

'If Cornelli is Cesare he'd behave like the crook we know him to be. Either he'll find a hide-out in one of the big cities, probably London, or bury himself in the depths of the country. It could be either. But sooner or later our police will find him. It would be a waste of time for us to start looking for him. A man hunt of this sort is a matter of organization in which the entire police force of the country takes part. Unfortunately in this case we've nothing to go on. The haunts of a criminal on the run, or an escaped prisoner, are known, and can be watched. Sooner or later such people make for home, if only because they run out of money. Money isn't likely to worry Cornelli or he wouldn't have come here at all.'

'All these crooks have money tucked away, if only to employ good lawyers if they're caught.'

'That's another snag. Whereas most people in Europe have to be satisfied with a fixed currency allowance Cesare could bring in a suitcase full of dollars if he has them. There's no limit on dollars.'

'You think of all the snags,' said Eddie, gloomily.

'Glossing over them won't help us. I can think of one for Cesare, too.'

'What's that?'

‘It will only be a matter of time before Carlo becomes difficult.’

‘I don’t get it.’

‘No matter how well Cesare treats the boy, regardless of the excuses he makes for not returning to the States, there’ll come a day when Carlo will want to go home to see his father. Unless he’s a fool he’ll wonder why he isn’t allowed to go, and if Cesare tries to keep too tight a hold on him he’ll become suspicious, smell something fishy in the whole business.’

‘That’s what I’m afraid of.’

‘Afraid of what?’

‘The boy becoming restless. If it came to a showdown Cesare would murder the boy rather than let him go to the police or go home to his pop.’

‘I’m afraid you’re right,’ agreed Biggles. ‘Looked at in that light, time may be an important factor. Still, all we can do is wait while the police get on with the job. It would be futile for us to rush about the country looking for two needles in a thousand haystacks.’

‘Sure. I realize that.’

‘All right. Then let’s get things moving. Ginger, while I’m talking to Gaskin you might take these photos to London airport and see if anyone there can give you a line on them. It would be something if we could establish definitely that this chap calling himself Cornelli is in fact Cesare Paola.’

‘Okay.’

Before moving off Ginger had a good look at the photographs after they had been passed round. Knowledge of the gangster’s criminal activities may have prejudiced him, but it struck him that the man was a perfect example of the type so often portrayed in American films. The photograph, as is usual with such records, showed only head and shoulders. The face, thin and drawn in hard lines, was expressionless: what is sometimes called deadpan. The eyes, half-closed, dark and deep-set under a low forehead topped with sleek, jet-black hair, were as coldly calculating as those of a bird of prey. The portrait, Ginger decided, was that of a man both unscrupulous and merciless, prepared to go to any lengths to get what he wanted.

As far as the boy was concerned there was nothing remarkable about him except that his face was so soft and smooth that it might have been that of a girl. His Italian ancestry was evident in a dark complexion, but broadly speaking he looked a healthy, perfectly normal lad, somewhat tired and smiling sadly as if trying to oblige the photographer.

Ginger put the photographs in his pocket and departed on his errand.

Biggles called Inspector Gaskin on the intercom, telephone and asked him if he could spare a few minutes. ‘He’s coming up,’ he said, as he replaced the receiver.

Presently the Inspector came, as usual with his pipe in his mouth. Having introduced Eddie, the two having not previously met, Biggles explained the position.

Gaskin listened to the story in silence. At the finish he said: ‘If these two

came here in the names of Cornelli, provided they haven't changed 'em since they arrived it shouldn't take us long to find 'em. I'd better go and get things under way. I'll let you know as soon as I have any news.' He went out.

Biggles sat back. 'Well, Eddie, there we are. All we can do now is wait for results. While we're waiting for Ginger to come back we might as well go out and get some lunch. Algy and Bertie can take over the office while we're out.'

It was just after three o'clock when Ginger returned from the airport. 'Not much luck,' he reported. 'The air hostess who was on the Atlantic run has just been moved to the Middle East, so there was no chance of seeing her. The names of the Cornellis are on the passenger list, but the only man I could find to help in the way of recognition was a Customs Officer who, when I showed him the photos, thought he had checked their luggage. But he couldn't swear to it. Of course, he's seeing people all day and has handled the luggage of thousands of people since.'

'That's the trouble with a stone-cold trail,' said Biggles.

'The odd thing was, the thing that clicked in this chap's memory was the boy wearing dark glasses, which at the time he thought a bit unusual. So if they were worn as a disguise they may have defeated their object. He says the man also wore glasses — ordinary spectacles.'

'That doesn't help us much,' replied Biggles. 'It's unlikely that the glasses were necessary in either case so they might have been discarded as soon as Cornelli and the boy were safely in the country.'

'I still think they were Cesare Paola and Carlo Salvatore,' averred Eddie.

'It seems to me,' resumed Biggles, thoughtfully, 'that young Carlo, assuming it is him, is still content to be with Cesare.'

'You mean, Cornelli is letting the kid do what he likes.'

'Why not? But I wasn't thinking of that. I was thinking of the dark glasses. The boy must have wondered why he'd been asked to put them on. You say there's nothing wrong with his eyes. Cesare would have to give a reason. What reason could he give except tell the truth and say it was to avoid being recognized. If Carlo accepted that explanation he's obviously still satisfied to be with Cesare. Aside from that, had he realized he'd been kidnapped and demanded to be taken home there was nothing to prevent him from making a scene at the airport. There are plenty of officials there who would want to know what was going on. Carlo is old enough to tell them. It looks more and more to me, Eddie, that Cesare is being clever, and your first theory was right. Carlo doesn't realize he's been kidnapped; nor does he understand the danger he's in. He's having a good time and is prepared to carry on with it.'

'I guess that's it,' agreed Eddie. 'But as far as we're concerned it's still a case of kidnapping.'

'Of course it is.'

'And in the States that's a crime that can mean the death penalty.'

'Cesare's not likely to forget that,' asserted Biggles. 'He'll take no chances of being put in the electric chair. If we ever catch up with him he'll fight it

out.'

'Of course he will. You see the peril the kid's in. With the penalty the same for kidnapping as for murder, Cesare could get nothing worse if he killed the boy when he gets sick of carting him around.'

'True enough,' agreed Biggles. 'Well, there's nothing more we can do at present. We shall just have to leave it to Gaskin.'

'And if he can't find 'em?'

Biggles shrugged. 'You look like spending the rest of your life searching every country in the world. You can stay with us while we're waiting. We can find you a shakedown in our quarters.'

'Thanks,' acknowledged Eddie, gratefully. 'I shall then be with you should anything turn up.'

CHAPTER 3



CHAPTER 3

NOW TO THE NORTH

FIVE days passed. Eddie became more and more depressed as each one went by without news. 'They must have skipped the country,' he declared despondently.

'You Americans are always in such a hurry,' Biggles told him. 'I told you this job couldn't be done in five minutes. Give Gaskin a chance. When our police say they can't find 'em will be time enough for you to start studying the map of Europe.'

It was during the afternoon of the sixth day that the tension was released as if a steel spring had snapped. They were all in Biggles's office discussing the possibilities for the hundredth time when the door opened and the bulky figure of Inspector Gaskin loomed on the threshold. 'We've found 'em,' he announced, with no more emotion than if he was speaking of a lost pair of spectacles.

Eddie sprang to his feet. 'You have!' he exclaimed, delightedly.

'That's what I said,' returned the Inspector, taking a penknife from his pocket and scraping out the bowl of his pipe in Biggles's ash-tray. 'Sorry it took so long,' he added, inconsequentially.

'Where are they?' cried Eddie.

'You'd never guess.'

Eddie nearly choked. 'Cripes! There are times when you English kill me. I'm not guessing. *Where are they?*'

'In Scotland.'

'Where in Scotland?' asked Biggles.

'About as far off the map as they could get. They must have got the name

out of a guide-book or something. We've just got word through from the Banffshire police they're staying at a pub in the Highlands, a place called Tomintoul. It's said to be the highest village in the U.K.'

'What's the name of the pub?'

'A medium-sized sporting hotel called the Richmond Arms. I've got you all the details that might be useful. The village is about fourteen miles from the nearest railway, which is a little branch line which makes contact with the main line at Aviemore Junction.'

Said Biggles: 'There's no doubt about them being there?'

'Well, I haven't been there myself to see, if that's what you mean. All I know is what I'm told, but you can reckon there's no mistake about that. There are two people staying at the pub under the name you gave me—Cornelli. Father and son. That should be good enough. There can't be so many Cornellis about.'

'What are they doing there?'

'What most people do who go there this time o' the year. About all there is to do.'

'And what's that?'

'Fishing.'

There was a moment of silence, all eyes on the Inspector.

It was broken by Eddie. 'Fishing,' he breathed, in a curious voice.

Biggles looked at him. 'Fishing,' he echoed. 'What else? We're not so smart,' he went on sadly. 'We should have thought of this fishing angle. It would have narrowed the search. What could have been more likely than that the boy should ask to go fishing in a real live river? And if Cornelli's trying to keep him happy, he'd agree.'

'Yeah,' murmured Eddie. 'Like you say.' He seemed slightly dazed.

'We'd decided Cesare would give the boy everything he wanted to keep him quiet and what more likely than fishing? We might have guessed it. We knew he was keen on fishing.'

Eddie drew a deep breath. 'Yeah,' he said again, in a melancholy voice. 'I oughta have my head examined not to think o' that.'

'They'd have no difficulty in getting the name of a fishing hotel,' went on Biggles. 'There are plenty of 'em. There are books available with that information. I need *my* head examined, too. I said they'd either hide up in a city or some remote rural district. That wasn't very bright. What would Carlo do in a city?'

'He might have heard of this place Tomintoul before he came over,' surmised Eddie. 'I saw his room. It was littered with books on fishing, and where to fish.'

'From what I hear they've gone to the right place,' put in the Inspector. 'Plenty of salmon in the river as well as trout.'

'Don't rub it in,' groaned Eddie.

'We needn't waste time arguing what we might have done or should have

done,' said Biggles shortly. He looked up at the Inspector. 'You're sure they're still there?'

'They were there yesterday. Been there a fortnight. I've heard nothing about 'em moving.'

'If they've been there a fortnight they didn't waste any time in London. I suppose you don't know how they travelled?'

'No. All I know is they've got a car. Where they are they'd need one for getting about. They might have driven up from London in it or it may be they picked one up in Scotland somewhere. I don't know about that. On a job like this it doesn't do for the police to ask too many questions for fear of scaring the birds.'

'Quite right,' agreed Biggles.

'What are we sitting here for?' snapped Eddie, impatiently. 'Let's go. All I want now is to have a look at these two. That'll tell me all I need to know. How do we get there?'

Gaskin answered. 'You can get part way by train but it takes time, and you'd need a car at the other end unless you feel like walking twelve to fourteen miles, mostly uphill. There's a good train, the night express, leaves Euston for Inverness somewhere about seven. You change at Aviemore Junction and wait there for the local train—'

'We can do better than that,' broke in Biggles. 'Why be dependent on trains, fiddling about at junctions, and then end up in a car anyway, when we've got an aircraft? We might as well fly up to Dalcross— that's the aerodrome for Inverness — spend the night there, hire a car and press on first thing in the morning.'

'You'd do it quicker that way,' said Gaskin.

'Okay,' agreed Eddie, eagerly. 'When do we start — right away?'

Biggles looked at his watch. 'We might just get to Dalcross before dark. There are too many mountains in the way for comfortable night flying. We could spend the night at Inverness and hit the road for Tomintoul as soon as it's light enough to see the signposts. Take the wrong road in the Highlands and you're likely to meet yourself coming back—'

'Shucks! Why waste time sleeping. Why not go straight on to this place Tomintoul?'

'I've just given you one reason. I know these Highland roads. We'd gain nothing by getting lost. Besides, there might not be a vacant room at the hotel. These Highland fishing hotels get pretty full up at this time of the year. We don't want to spend the night touring the Highlands looking for accommodation.'

'Aw shucks! At a pinch we could spend the night in the car.'

'Why rush things? We shall have to go about this carefully. We can't just barge in and—'

'Why not?'

'Why do you always have to be in such a deuce of a hurry? If this man is

Cesare, he has only to get one sniff of who we are and he'll be off like a dingbat.'

'Then we go after him.'

'And having come face to face with him what are you going to do? Have you thought of that?'

'Arrest him.'

'You, as an American, couldn't do that.'

'You could.'

'Could I? That might not be as simple as it sounds. Don't forget he's travelling as a Canadian — a British subject.'

'So what?'

'What are we going to charge him with? Over here you can't arrest a man without charging him with something.'

'Kidnapping.'

'And what if Cornelli says the boy's with him of his own free will?'

'Hear what the boy has to say about it.'

'And if Carlo says it's true: that he's on a fishing trip with his father, or a friend—what then?'

'Cesare took the boy away from home. That's still kidnapping. I'd ask the boy to come home with me.'

'And if he refused to go with you, then what are you going to do — take him away by force?'

'I'd tell him the man he's with is a crook.'

'That could lay you open to an action for slander. If the boy is thoroughly enjoying himself, as seems more than likely at the moment, he might refuse to believe it. Remember, until it can be proved otherwise, Cesare is a Canadian.'

'He's a naturalized American subject.'

'We know that, but no one else does, over here.'

'It could be proved.'

'Admittedly, by an exchange of notes across the Atlantic. That would take some time, and while these formalities were going on between our respective governments Cesare might slip away.'

Eddie was looking worried. 'He couldn't if he was under arrest.'

'I've already told you that we couldn't hold him merely on suspicion.'

'That's right,' put in Gaskin.

'What I'm saying is,' continued Biggles, 'as things stand at present everything would almost certainly depend on the attitude taken by the boy; and the odds are a hundred to one he'd deny he'd been kidnapped. In fact, he may not yet have realized that is what has happened.'

'Are you trying to be awkward?' inquired Eddie, in a pained voice.

'Certainly not. I'm simply trying to make you see the legal position in order to back up my argument that the business of recovering the boy isn't such plain sailing as you seem to think.'

'All right. Then what *are* we to do?' asked Eddie, desperately. 'You tell

me.'

'What I suggest is this,' returned Biggles. 'First, we make sure that the Cornellis are still at Tomintoul. Next, confirm that they are the people you're looking for.'

'Then what?'

'Watch them while we get authority to pick them up. That might be arranged in London, but it may mean conversations across the Atlantic. America isn't the only other country involved. Canada comes into the picture.'

'How are we going to watch them at a place like Tomintoul without Cesare realizing what's going on? If he sees our car behind him everywhere he goes he'll soon tumble to that. As a gangster he'll have had plenty of experience of being shadowed.'

'One, or some of us, could stay at the hotel as fishers, assuming accommodation is available. It shouldn't be too difficult. Let's do that for a start and leave further plans until we see how the land lies.'

'Okay, like you say,' agreed Eddie, without enthusiasm.

Biggles got up. 'Let's get to Scotland. Thanks, Gaskin, for your help. I'll do as much for you some day. We'll let you know how we get on.'

'Don't lose him,' requested the Inspector as he went out. 'I don't want to have to go over all this again.'

Biggles turned to the others. 'You'd better come, Ginger. And you, Bertie. You may have to be the fisherman.'

'Jolly good. I'll slip home and get my rods and join you at the aerodrome. If we're going fishing we'd better have something to fish with — if you see what I mean.'

'Algy, you take care of things here till we get back in case anything crops up,' went on Biggles. 'The chief's out at the moment. When he comes in tell him what's cooking. Say if we find the boy I shall probably 'phone from Scotland for instructions on procedure. You might ring the hangar and tell Smyth to pull the Proctor out ready.'

'Okay.'

'Ginger, go and bring the car round. We'll be with you in a couple of minutes. We shall have to call at the flat for some kit.'

Ginger went off.

'I'm putting you to a heck of a lot of trouble,' said Eddie apologetically.

'Forget it,' Biggles told him, briefly.

In a little more than half an hour they were getting into the Air 'Police Proctor', which had been warmed up and stood waiting for them. Biggles took off, turned north, and after a flight devoid of incident landed at Dalcross, on the Moray Firth, just as the long June twilight of the Scottish Highlands was ending in the afterglow of sunset.

Having shown his police pass he parked the machine, asking for it to be refuelled. He then put through a call to Inverness for a taxi to fetch them, and

on arrival in the capital of the Highlands made arrangements with the garage proprietor for the hire of a self-drive car which, as a matter of detail, was a Humber Hawk. This done, accommodation was found at the Station Hotel where, after some refreshment, Biggles asked to be called promptly at six in the morning.

‘That’ll do for today,’ he concluded. ‘Let’s get to bed.’

CHAPTER 4



CHAPTER 4

A NEAR MISS—TWICE

THE following day dawned clear and bright, and after an early breakfast Biggles was at the wheel of the hired car speeding along the first-class straight road that was available for the first part of the forty-five mile journey to Tomintoul. But after crossing the Spey bridge at Grantown the highway deteriorated quickly to a typical Highland second-class road, pursuing a track up hill and down dale across open rolling moorland, visible for miles ahead. The heather was not yet in bloom, but larks sang in the blue sky and broods of young grouse dusted themselves along the sandy verges.

‘At least we’re getting some fresh air,’ remarked Ginger, approvingly.

‘We should get to the village about the time the fishers are having their breakfast,’ observed Biggles. ‘There wasn’t much point in starting earlier.’

A little while later, as he went into bottom gear to take a steep descent with a narrow stone bridge at the bottom, he continued: ‘That river at the bottom must be the Avon, presumably the one the boy is fishing.’ Having crossed the sparkling water he turned right up the hill that led to the objective.

When, at the top of the long, straight, gently rising street, the wide square of the village green came into sight, it presented a picture which not even Biggles had expected, even though he had mentioned the popularity of Highland fishing establishments. There was no mistaking the Richmond Arms, for it stood immediately facing them with its name across the front in bold letters.

The area in front of it was a scene of activity. There were parked some

seven or eight cars, while a small shooting brake was just leaving by the road that ran on past the hotel. Some of the cars had doors or boots open as their owners loaded their fishing equipment for the day on the river— waders, brogues, rods, gaffs, bags and baskets which, judging by the protruding tops of Thermos flasks, contained the day's food rations. On the green itself a tweed-clad man, watched by a little group of spectators, was making practice casts. Another had stretched his line between two trees and was busy greasing it. Several other people, women and children as well as men, stood about in earnest conversation, probably discussing the fishing prospects in relation to the weather. Apparently the majority of guests had already had breakfast.

'Well, if Cornelli and the boy are here it shouldn't take us long to spot them,' said Biggles, confidently, as moving dead slow, he found a place to park behind the cars already there.

'I wonder which of these cars is theirs,' murmured Ginger.

Eddie was first out, his eyes running quickly over everyone in sight. 'I don't see them,' he said.

'Maybe they haven't finished breakfast,' suggested Biggles. 'I can see people still in the dining-room,' he added, after a glance through the window facing the front. 'Let's wait a bit. People are too busy to take any notice of us. Better not call attention to ourselves by asking questions. We can do that later.'

They waited. Five minutes, ten, a quarter of an hour passed. More people came out of the hotel but none looked like the Cornellis. One by one the cars began to move off for their respective beats on the river. The last one went, and still there was no sign of Cornelli and son.

'Stand fast,' said Biggles. 'I'll go in the hall and have a look at the register. It should be just inside, on a table.' He went in.

In a few minutes he came back. 'The names are there,' he informed, quietly. 'Arturo Cornelli and son. The date of departure column is still blank so they should still be here. But there's one thing I don't understand. There's a roster hanging on the wall allocating the fishing beats for the day. Their names aren't on it.'

'What do you make of that?'

'Obviously they can't be going fishing today.'

'I don't like the sound of that,' said Eddie, anxiously. 'Isn't it time we went in and asked about them?'

Biggles shrugged. 'Please yourself, but I'd feel inclined to wait a little longer. Maybe they're in their bedrooms, sick or something. If you go in and ask for them what reasonable excuse could you give for wanting to see them?'

'Sure. That's right.'

'They're bound to show up—unless, of course, they'd gone out, either to the river or on some trip or other, before we arrived. They may have gone to the nearest town to buy fishing tackle.'

'That could be the answer.'

They waited another ten minutes and then Eddie's patience became exhausted. 'I'm going in to make inquiries,' he announced.

'Okay. I'll come with you,' offered Biggles. 'Leave the talking to me.'

'Why?'

'Because if Cornelli happens to be within earshot and hears your American accent he'll have a second look at you and may wonder what you're doing here.'

'Okay. I didn't think of that.'

Biggles, with Eddie beside him, walked through the open door into the hotel. There was only one person in the hall, a fair, stockily-built man who was arranging some letters on the side table.

'Excuse me, but am I speaking to the proprietor?' Biggles put the question.

The man turned. 'Aye,' he said. 'Sorry, we're full up.'

'I wonder if you have a man staying here by the name of Cornelli? He has his son with him.'

'Aye.'

'Do you know where I could find him?'

'Wait a minute and I'll ask my housekeeper. She may know where he's gone.'

Biggles had the photographs ready. 'Are these the people?'

The proprietor looked at the pictures. 'Aye,' he said. 'That will be them. They're no' fishing the day.'

'So I see from the roster.'

The man disappeared into the back regions, but in two minutes he was back. 'Mr Cornelli and his son have left,' he said casually.

Biggles looked taken aback. 'You mean — they've left the hotel for good?'

'Aye. I mind someone else asking after them on the telephone, yesterday or the day before.'

'When did they leave?'

'A few minutes ago, as soon as they'd finished breakfast, so my manageress tells me. It seems they paid their bill last night so as to make an early start.'

Biggles tried to hide his disappointment. 'Their departure was rather sudden, wasn't it?' he suggested carelessly.

'People come and go.'

'Did they give any reason for going off in such a hurry?'

'They didn't tell me and I don't ask questions.'

'You don't happen to know where they've gone?'

'No.'

'So they didn't leave a forwarding address?'

'No.'

'I take it they left by car?'

'There's no other way.'

'Their own car?'

‘Surely.’

‘What make of car was it?’

By this time the proprietor’s eyes were clouding with suspicion. ‘Why all these questions? Is something wrong?’

Apparently Biggles felt bound to offer an explanation. ‘As a matter of fact,’ he said confidentially, ‘we’re special Inquiry Agents acting on behalf of relatives who are anxious to make contact with the Cornellis. They’re over here from America and have been moving about. The boy in particular is keen on fishing. They must have gone off to try another river. But I must get hold of them. What sort of car were they using?’

‘It was a light Austin shooting brake.’

‘Could you remember its number?’

The proprietor smiled bleakly. ‘With everyone here having a car and cars coming and going all day you wouldn’t expect me to take notice of their numbers.’

‘No. I understand that.’

‘But there’s one thing I can tell you about the car. Its near-side front wing was dented and scratched from trying to take the Brig of Avon too fast.’

‘Thank you,’ acknowledged Biggles. ‘That might be helpful. We saw that car leaving just as we got here. There’s a chance we may overtake them. The car turned left when it left the hotel. To where does that road lead?’

‘It depends on how far they went before they turned off. If they took the first turn to the right, a matter of not more than two minutes away, they’d be on the right road to Deeside. If they kept straight on there’s no other turn for some miles. If they went straight on they’d come to Dufftown. If they took the left fork they’d come to Ballindalloch and the main road. That could take them to the West Coast or the East Coast.’

‘Thank you,’ said Biggles. ‘I’m much obliged to you. We’ll see if we can find them.’ Followed by Eddie he went back to the car. ‘Not that there’s much hope of that now,’ he added, gloomily.

Ginger and Bertie looked at them expectantly. They must have seen from their faces that something had gone amiss for they both exclaimed: ‘What’s wrong?’

‘They’ve gone,’ said Eddie, bitterly.

‘We missed them by a minute,’ muttered Biggles. ‘They were in that shooting brake we saw leave just as we arrived. Sorry, Eddie. My fault. We should have pressed right on last night, but there didn’t seem any reason in it then. The question I’m asking myself is, why did they go off in such a hurry?’

‘The boss said someone else had been asking after them,’ reminded Eddie. ‘Was that the cause?’

‘Could have been. The only other reason I can think of is, the fishing might be bad and so they decided to try somewhere else. Just a minute.’ Biggles walked over to the man who had been greasing his line and was now reeling it in.

‘How’s the fishing?’ he asked.

‘No good,’ was the frank answer. ‘The water’s too low. There hasn’t been a fish brought in for days.’

‘Thanks.’ Biggles returned to the car and told the others what he had just learned.

‘One of two things must have happened,’ he continued. ‘Either Cornelli heard a whisper that inquiries were being made about him and took fright, in which case he might be going anywhere, or else young Carlo got fed up with trying to catch fish that wouldn’t look at anything and has persuaded his pal to take him to another river. If so they would probably stay in Scotland.’

‘How many of these fishing hotels are there in Scotland?’ asked Eddie.

‘Hundreds. Too many for us to go round them all if that’s what you’re contemplating.’

‘Pity we didn’t come straight on here last night, old boy,’ put in Bertie.

‘Actually, I don’t know that it would have made a lot of difference if we had. We wouldn’t have known Cornelli intended leaving so early this morning. He’d have been on his way before we’d realized he’d gone, in which case we’d find ourselves in the same position as we’re in now. I don’t think there’s much hope of finding them, but we might as well try. They may stop for petrol, or a meal, and someone may have noted the number of their brake.’

They were in their seats and Biggles had slammed his door when another car, a big old six-seater, pulled in. Two men got out and walked into the hotel, leaving the driver, wearing a chauffeur’s peaked cap, standing by the vehicle.

Biggles’s first glance at the two men as they walked past was perfunctory, but he gave them a second look. ‘That was an Italian-looking type,’ he observed, casually.

‘From the lurid piece of neckwear he had on he might even be an American,’ remarked Ginger.

Eddie was frowning. ‘I’ve seen that man before somewhere,’ he said in a puzzled voice. ‘In fact, I’m not sure I haven’t seen both of ‘em, but I can’t remember where it was.’

‘Really? That’s a bit odd. I notice they haven’t any fishing gear. I wonder where they’ve just come from and what they’re doing here. That looks like a local car and driver. Just a minute.’ He got out, spoke briefly to the driver and returned to his seat. ‘Yes, it’s a local car from Aviemore Junction. The driver says his fares got off the London train and asked for a car to bring them straight on rather than wait for the branch line connection. But if we’re going after Cornelli we’d better be on our way,’ he concluded abruptly, slipping in the clutch. The car moved off, taking the road Cornelli’s brake had taken. At the corner it was signposted Ballindalloch. Almost at once they came to the side turning which they had been told went over the hills to Deeside. It looked very second-class and Biggles ignored it.

There was no other turning for some miles, when they came to the fork, one road leading to Ballindalloch and the other to Dufftown. Biggles stopped.

‘Now which way?’ he said.

At that moment there appeared round a bend on the Dufftown road a flock of sheep. The shepherd walked behind.

‘He’d know if he’d met a brake,’ said Ginger. ‘The dogs would have to work the sheep to the side of the road to let it through.’

‘Ask him.’

Ginger got out. He spoke briefly to the shepherd and returned. ‘He’s come four miles and he hasn’t met anything,’ he said, getting back into his seat.

‘At the rate he’s going that’s over an hour. Cornelli can’t have gone that way.’ Biggles drove on towards Ballindalloch, to find it was a district of a few scattered cottages rather than a village. Keeping straight on, another twenty minutes saw them crossing the bridge which two hours earlier they had crossed in the reverse direction, the Spey bridge at Grantown.

Inquiries were made at every garage in the long main street without result. There was now a fair amount of traffic about.

Biggles lit a cigarette. ‘It’s no use,’ he said. ‘We’re wasting our time. With so many roads now from which to choose, cruising about haphazard won’t get us anywhere. Cornelli may have taken the main road south for anywhere in England, or north to Inverness for anywhere in the Highlands.’

‘What do you suggest we do about it?’ asked Eddie, despondently. ‘One way seems the same as another.’

‘For all the good we’re likely to do we might as well take the car back to the garage in Inverness, go on to Dalcross and fly back to London. Gaskin may be able to help us. At least he now has a clue to work on — an Austin brake with a busted near-side front mudguard.’

Eddie sighed. ‘Okay,’ he agreed, wearily.

Biggles restarted the car and settled down for the thirty-four mile run to their starting point — Inverness.

When, nearly an hour later, he drove into the forecourt of the garage from which they had hired their car, there, standing not ten yards away, behind the petrol pumps, was a light wooden-bodied Austin shooting brake. The near front wing was buckled. Standing by it, looking at the damage, was a man. He was not Cornelli.

Biggles, staring, stopped with a jerk.

‘There it is,’ said Ginger, in a voice that sounded as if he was being strangled.

‘I don’t believe it,’ muttered Eddie.

‘It isn’t true,’ declared Bertie, with a little high-pitched laugh. ‘Oh, I say, what a delicious drop of gravy!’

Biggles shook his head. ‘These things don’t happen. There could be more than one brake with a busted wing...’ He looked around. ‘I don’t see Cornelli.’

‘He can’t be far away,’ said Eddie, tersely.

Biggles slipped out of his seat. They all got out.

Said Biggles, to the man standing by the damaged vehicle: ‘Excuse me, but

is this yours?’

The man turned, smiling wanly. ‘It is. Want to buy it?’

‘Buy it?’ Biggles spoke as if he didn’t understand.

‘Yes, it’s for sale.’

Biggles put a hand on the bonnet. ‘It’s just been out.’

‘It’s just been brought back — like this. Practically a new car, too. It’s one of our hire cars, self-drive. This is what happens.’ The man indicated the damage. ‘But I mustn’t grumble. He paid for it, which is more than some people do.’

Biggles spoke slowly. ‘I see. What you’re saying is, this brake has just been out on hire?’

‘That’s right. Have any trouble with yours?’

‘None, thanks. When was the brake taken out?’

‘About a fortnight ago.’

‘When was it brought back?’

‘A bit over an hour ago.’ The man looked at Biggles suspiciously. ‘Why do you want to know?’

Biggles showed his police badge. ‘We’re police officers.’

‘Oh, so it’s like that.’

‘Yes. Had the man who hired the brake got a boy with him?’

‘Aye. He had.’

‘Was this them?’ Biggles showed the photographs.

‘Aye. That’s them.’

‘Do you know where they are now?’

‘I’ve no idea. They paid for the car and went off.’

‘Had they any luggage?’

‘They each had a light case and the boy had a bundle of rods.’

‘Was there any talk of them staying in the town or going on to fish somewhere else?’

‘They didn’t say a word in front of me.’

‘Which way did they go when they left here?’

The man pointed. ‘Towards the town centre.’

‘Was it you, personally, who handed over the brake to them?’

‘Aye.’

‘What home address did they give?’

‘The man told me they were Canadians over here on a fishing holiday. The only address they could give in this country was the hotel in London where they’d stayed before they came here. We got quite a lot of that nowadays. They said they’d come up from London on the night train and wanted a car to get them around while they were here.’

‘What was the name of their hotel in London?’

‘I’ll have to check that.’ The garage proprietor went to his office and presently returned. ‘The Grosvenor.’

‘You let them hire a car on the strength of that?’

‘Oh no. Since they had no fixed address I had to ask for a deposit. The man paid it without any argument. ‘I’ve just given it back to him, less the cost of the damage. He said he was quite prepared to pay for that.’

‘Thank you,’ acknowledged Biggles. ‘Well, as that seems to be as much as you can tell us we’ll get along. By the way, just in case they should still be in the district I wouldn’t say anything to anyone about police inquiries. You know how people talk. As far as you’re concerned we’re looking for two friends of ours.’

‘I understand.’

‘Well, can you beat that?’ growled Eddie, as they walked away. ‘That’s twice we’ve just missed ‘em. It kills me to think that had we sat here instead of tearing off to Tomintoul they’d have walked right into us.’

‘It’s always easy to say what might have happened had one done something else,’ said Biggles, dryly. He stopped and continued the conversation on the pavement. ‘Let’s see how things look now. They’ve handed in their car. I take that to mean they’re not staying in Inverness, nor anywhere near it. They’ve gone, and it’s not much use trying to guess where. But as they came from London it would be reasonable to suppose they’ve gone back there. If they’ve gone anywhere else — well, we’d be wasting our time looking for ‘em. They came up by rail so they may go back that way, but if they’re in a hurry they may take the air service south. We could try both — the railway first. If that gets us nowhere we’ll try the air booking office. Of course, there’s always a chance they may be waiting for the night express, in which case they’ll still be somewhere in the town, so keep your eyes open, everyone.’

CHAPTER 5



CHAPTER 5

CORNELLI WINS A TRICK

INQUIRIES at the railway station yielded nothing.

In view of the number of people travelling Biggles was neither surprised nor disappointed when the booking office clerk, behind his little pigeon hole, said he was too busy to notice individuals. At the most he only caught a fleeting glimpse of the passenger and as often as not didn't see his face at all.

'We'll wait here for Bertie,' decided Biggles. 'If he fails we'll get a taxi to take us to Dalcross and hit the breeze back to London.'

Bertie had left the party to make inquiries at the airways booking office.

Ginger's eyes, wandering round the general platform, suddenly came to a stop. 'There are those two men we saw at Tomintoul,' he observed, without any real interest. 'You remember, they rolled up in a car just after we did. The driver said they'd come from Aviemore. They appear to be waiting for someone.'

'Where are they?'

'Over there, by the barrier of the main line platform, watching the people who are boarding the train. From the way they keep looking over here I fancy they've recognized us, too,' said Ginger who, for the first time, was able to have a good look at them.

They were an ill-assorted couple. One was a small, slim man, dapper, clean-shaven, thin-lipped, sharp-featured with a darkish skin and dark eyes.

He, reasoned Ginger, must have been the one Biggles had referred to as Italian-looking. Unlike his companion, who was somewhat carelessly dressed, he was immaculate in a chalk-striped dark blue suit, the jacket cut with lapels reaching to the bottom button of his waistcoat. On his head, set at a slightly jaunty angle, was a stiff hat with the brim snapped down in front. A flowing necktie might have been a picture of a firework display.

The other was taller, fair and loose-limbed. The hair that showed round his ears below his hat was sandy. In build he was inclined to be gaunt, with cheeks rather sunken.

‘I’m sure I’ve seen that little guy before,’ declared Eddie. ‘I can’t remember where, but I shall get it in a minute.’

‘Whoever they are they didn’t come to Scotland to catch salmon,’ remarked Ginger, sarcastically. ‘They’re having a good look at everyone getting on the London train. They’ve also been having a dekko at us.’

‘Could be they remember seeing us some place and are wondering where,’ suggested Eddie. ‘I’d bet my life I’d seen that little feller before. Must have been in the States. He couldn’t have got that neckware any place else.’

‘They’re coming over,’ said Biggles. ‘I can’t imagine why, but I believe they’re going to speak to us. There’s something queer about that pair. They don’t look like fishers. What were they doing at a place like Tomintoul? But neither do we look like fishermen if it comes to that.’

Biggles’s belief was quickly confirmed. The two men came over and stopped close, facing them. The tall one spoke. He had a curious accent which struck Ginger as Scottish with an American drawl.

‘Are you the gentlemen who were at Tomintoul earlier this morning?’ he inquired.

‘That’s right,’ answered Biggles. ‘We were.’

‘I thought I wasn’t mistaken.’

‘The hotel was full up.’

The next question was a shocker, but it explained much. ‘Were you by any chance asking about a gentleman named Cornelli? He was there with a boy.’

Caught absolutely off guard Biggles’s face expressed the astonishment he really felt at the very last question he expected. ‘Cornelli?’ he echoed, to gain time to think. ‘Who’s he?’

The little man replied. ‘Pal of ours.’ He had a thin, hard voice, which came out of the corner of his mouth. His lips hardly moved.

‘Why should you suppose we were asking after a man of that name?’ said Biggles, now over his surprise.

‘That’s what we’re asking you, mister.’

‘I’m afraid I can’t help you. What made you think I might be interested in a man named Cornelli?’

‘The boss of the hotel.’

‘Why? What did he say?’

‘When we asked him about Cornelli he acted sorta dumb. Said he wasn’t

there.'

'Well, he should know.'

'Sure. We said we happened to know he was there.'

'So?'

'Then he said he'd gone.'

'But what has all this to do with me?'

The man answered slowly and deliberately. 'Then the boss told us some people had just been in who might be able to help us. As you'd just come out we figured he might have meant you. Like I said, Cornelli's a pal of ours and we aimed to do him a good turn.'

'In that case it's a pity you can't find him.'

The man regarded Biggles with half-closed eyes. 'You ain't answered my question, mister.'

'What question?' asked Biggles, innocently.

'Was it you who was asking after Cornelli?'

'For heaven's sake,' cried Biggles impatiently. 'Why should I be asking questions about a man I've never seen in my life? Don't be ridiculous. Sorry, but I can't help you. That's all I have to say.'

It was Bertie who saved a situation that was fast becoming difficult. He hurried up, took one comprehensive look at the two strangers and tapped Biggles on the shoulder. 'Excuse me barging in, and all that, but may I speak to you a moment?' He took Biggles to one side.

'What is it?' breathed Biggles.

'They're on their way to London by air. They booked here at the office and said they'd provide their own transport to the aerodrome.'

'What time did the plane leave?'

'It shouldn't have left yet.' Bertie snatched a glance at his watch. 'It's due to leave the ground in a quarter of an hour.'

'If we can get a taxi we might just catch it. See if you can find one. I'll bring the others along.'

Bertie dashed off.

'Come on, you chaps,' Biggles said sharply to Ginger and Eddie.

'What's the hurry?' said the Italian-looking man.

'We've got an appointment.'

Leaving the two men staring after them Biggles led the way briskly to the station yard where, to his great satisfaction, he saw Bertie standing by a car.

'I've told the driver where we want to go,' informed Bertie, as they all scrambled into the vehicle.

'Did you tell him it was urgent?'

'I told him we wanted to catch the London plane.'

'Did he think he could do it?' asked Biggles, as the car moved off.

'No, but he's willing to try.'

'Fair enough.'

On the ten mile run to the aerodrome Biggles told Bertie the gist of the

conversation with the two strangers at the station. 'It seems,' he concluded, 'that we're not the only people looking for Cornelli. I don't understand it. Those two men seemed to know as much, if not more, than we do about him. What knocks me flat is that they should track him to Tomintoul, of all places in the world.'

'The only answer to that is, Cornelli must have told someone that was where he was heading for,' said Eddie.

The car was now racing along the main road.

'I'd say they were the people who'd previously rung up the hotel asking if Cornelli was there,' went on Eddie. 'The hotel man told us someone had phoned a couple days ago. It could have been them.'

'I think you're right,' agreed Biggles. 'Who else could it have been? The county police wouldn't ring up. They'd get their local officer to call. It looks as if those two rang up from London and asked if Cornelli was there. Being told he was they caught the night train, hired a car at Aviemore and arrived, like we did, just in time to miss him. Cornelli must have learned that someone had been asking after him; maybe the hotel proprietor told him; that's why he skipped in such a hurry.'

Bertie was looking constantly at his watch. 'We shan't do it,' he decided. 'Not if the plane leaves on time. Ten miles in twelve minutes was a bit much to expect, if you see what I mean.'

He was right. The car was still on the road a mile from the aerodrome when a big machine took off and headed south.

'There she goes,' observed Biggles. 'We've missed 'em again.' He called to the driver. 'All right. There's no hurry now.'

'Sorry.'

'That's all right. You did your best.'

'What are you going to do now?' asked Ginger. 'Take our own machine and follow on?'

'We might as well follow, but we shan't overtake them. Not that it matters. There's no need for us to break our necks attempting the impossible. The machine won't stop between here and London, so the sensible thing to do would be to phone Gaskin at the Yard and ask him to lay a man on to meet the plane. He could tail Cornelli to his hotel, or wherever he decides to stay, and give us the gen when we get there.'

'That's the plan, old boy,' agreed Bertie. 'We'll catch up with the blighters yet,' he added, cheerfully.

'We'll go back to Inverness and put the call through from there,' decided Biggles. 'Then we'll have some lunch and fly home.' He stopped the car and told the driver to turn back.

'Those two fellows at the station were watching the passengers board the London train,' said Ginger. 'Apparently they didn't think of the air service.'

'They may not have known there was one. It's a queer business altogether. The last thing I expected was to find someone else on the same job as

ourselves. I wonder who those two fellows are and what their game is. They look like a couple of gangsters to me, particularly that slick type with the blinding necktie.'

Eddie let out a curious noise, as if he had started to yell and choked it back. 'You're right,' he exclaimed. 'You've got it!'

'Got what?'

'Gangsters. I knew I ought to know that little guy. Now I've got him.'

'Who is he?'

'The Viper. That's what they call him. I can't remember his real name — if I ever heard it. I've never seen him before in the flesh, but I've seen that ratty face of his a dozen times when I've been going through our mug-shot albums.'

Biggles frowned. He looked serious. 'So that's it. If you're right it would explain a lot. You realize what it means?'

'Sure. It means Cornelli has double-crossed the gang and they're out to get him. I don't see how it could mean anything else. They didn't come to Scotland for the fishing.'

'That could be the answer, but I can think of another reason why they might be here. They know Cornelli has got the boy. With all your press publicity at home they're bound to know that. It may be the boy they're after. Cornelli may have grabbed the kid for spite, but the rest of the gang can have no such motive. What did you say the reward was for the return of the boy?'

'A hundred thousand dollars, but no doubt his pop would pay a million to get the kid back safe and sound.'

'That's big money in any language.'

'Sure is.'

'If Cornelli has pulled a fast one on his pals, who would I imagine expect to share the ransom money, the Viper may be here with two ideas — to bump off Cornelli and grab the boy into the bargain to get the cash. Anyway, it'll be one or the other. As you say, quite obviously the Viper hasn't come all this way merely to admire the scenery.'

'You're dead right. The only sorta landscape that type is interested in is the one with mountains of dollars in the background.'

'It boils down to this,' went on Biggles, gravely. 'We're now up against a very different proposition from the one we started out on. We shall have to watch we don't step on this particular snake. All vipers are venomous, but if I'm any judge of character the one we've been talking about has more poison in his fangs than the ordinary sort. We shall have to keep our eyes open for him when we get back to Inverness.'

'And Cornelli will have to watch his step, too, when he learns who's on his trail,' declared Eddie.

'The way he left Tomintoul suggests he may have tumbled to that already,' conjectured Biggles.

The car took them back into the town, dropping them at the general post-

office. Leaving the others to pay the driver, Biggles went in and put through a call to Inspector Gaskin at the Yard. When he came out he nodded. 'That's okay,' he said. 'Gaskin's taking care of things. He made a sound suggestion. Instead of us rushing straight back to London he advised me to take time, have some lunch, and he'd call me here. He'll have Cornelli tailed and will tell me where he's staying. I told him we'd take the call at the Station Hotel. Let's get along. I could do with a square meal. This Highland air gives one an appetite.'

'That sounds a bright idea to me,' said Ginger.

They went to the hotel dining-room and there, without haste, had their meal. As they lingered over coffee Biggles looked at the clock and remarked: 'Cornelli's plane should just about be touching down in London. Allowing time for him to get to a hotel we should be hearing from Gaskin in about another hour.'

Hardly had the words left Biggles's lips when a page appeared, calling him by name. For a moment Biggles looked startled. 'My word! That was quick work,' he exclaimed.

'Telephone, sir,' said the page. 'This way please.'

The others waited for him to return. When he reappeared Ginger took one look at his face and said softly: 'Hello. Something's come unstuck.'

As he sat down again at the table, Biggles said in a curious tone of voice: 'That was Gaskin. He was calling from the airport.'

'Well?'

'They weren't on the plane.'

There was a brief interval of stunned silence while this unexpected piece of information soaked in.

'Not on the plane?' said Bertie, incredulously.

'That's what Gaskin says. He was at the airport to meet it, so he should know.'

'But that's fantastic! They told me at the booking office—'

'What did they tell you?'

'That Cornelli and his son had taken tickets for the flight to London, today.'

'So they took tickets.'

'I didn't say I'd seen 'em board the plane,' protested Bertie. 'But they certainly booked the seats because I saw their names on the passenger list.'

'All right. There's no need to blow your top off. I'm not accusing you of anything.'

'There were only four other passengers so the Cornellis couldn't have lost their seats because, by some mistake, the machine was already loaded to capacity.'

'In which case there would be no need to lay on a reserve aircraft. I wish I'd known that when I was talking to Gaskin. That's what he thinks might have happened, so in making inquiries about it he's wasting his time. I told

him we'd wait here so that he could let us know if he found out anything.'

'Well, can you beat that?' muttered Eddie. 'Cornelli must have missed the plane.'

'He may not have tried to catch it.'

'I don't get it. Why pay for seats and then not take them?'

'Why did Cornelli say he'd provide his own transport to the aerodrome instead of taking the service bus which would have cost him nothing?'

'You tell me.'

'I'd wager he hadn't the slightest intention of taking that plane. He was playing the old trick of trailing a red herring. He knows he's being tailed by someone although he may not know by whom. That's why he left Tomintoul in such a hurry. Knowing he might be followed he's started laying false trails, and this air trip south was one of them. We fell for it. The Viper may fall for it too, if he inquires at the air terminal. He'll think Cornelli has fled south unless he goes to the aerodrome to check up. That, of course, is exactly what Cornelli wants him to think.'

'The Viper may not trouble to go to the aerodrome,' said Eddie. 'If he learns Cornelli bought tickets he'll assume he's gone back to London.'

'In which case we shall know what he doesn't know — that Cornelli wasn't on the plane. But it's no use sitting here any longer. The first thing to do now is to slip out to the aerodrome to see if anything is known about Cornelli not taking up his seats. There's a chance he did really miss the plane. Or he may have rung up to say he'd changed his mind about travelling today and switched his tickets for tomorrow or some other day. Let's go to the garage and get a taxi. If we happen to strike that same driver he'll think we're crazy.'

They didn't find the same car, but they found another and were soon on their way.

'What are you going to do, stay here or go back to London?' Ginger asked Biggles on the way to the aerodrome.

'I'll hear what they have to say at the airfield before I make up my mind about that,' replied Biggles. 'It needs thinking over. We'll ask our driver to wait in case we decide to go back to Inverness.'

They learned practically nothing at the aerodrome. The Cornellis, they were told, had been expected, and when they did not turn up on time the plane had actually been delayed two or three minutes, waiting for them. Eventually it had gone without them. Nothing had been heard from them. The tickets had not been cancelled, or switched. There was no other plane that day. That was all.

'So where do we go from here?' murmured Ginger, as they turned away.

'The burning question is, where has Cornelli gone?' returned Biggles.

'And if it comes to that, where has the Viper gone and what will he do next?' drawled Eddie.

'Let's sit on this seat a minute or two and think it over,' suggested Biggles.

‘We’re in no great hurry now. I must confess this has got me foxed.’

‘What I’m wondering,’ resumed Eddie, as they sat on the seat provided for waiting travellers, ‘is how the Viper and his pal got here to Scotland. I mean, how did they get out of the States? They wouldn’t be likely to have passports. But I suppose, like Cornelli, they could get forged ones.’

‘Have your police anything against them?’

‘Not at the moment as far as I know.’

‘In that case, if they applied for passports in the ordinary way they could hardly be refused. Your people might be only too glad to see the back of ‘em.’

‘I’ll call my chief tonight when the lines are clear and ask him if he knows anything about them,’ rejoined Eddie.

‘Speak of the devil...’ quoted Biggles. ‘Look who’s here!’

‘Well, how about that?’ breathed Eddie.

‘Life is full of surprises.’

‘Sure is — particularly in Scotland.’

Into the hall had marched the Viper and his companion. From their manner their mission was urgent. They pulled up dead when they saw who was sitting on the seat.

‘They’ve spotted us,’ said Biggles. ‘That’s shaken them, too. I don’t think they could have followed us. It’s more likely it has suddenly dawned on them that Cornelli may have left for the south by air.’ He smiled wanly. ‘They seem to be as busy as we are. They’re coming over. I wonder what line they’ll take now? Be careful what you say, everyone. I’m not telling them anything.’

CHAPTER 6

THE VIPER ASKS SOME QUESTIONS

THE two men strode over and stopped facing the seat, the Viper with his feet apart in an aggressive attitude, his expression, if not actually hostile, dark with suspicion.

Biggles frowned. 'What's the idea?' he demanded. 'Are you following us around?'

The question was ignored. 'What's your game?' was the reply, snapped in a brittle voice.

'Game? What are you talking about? We're not playing any game, and I can't see what business it would be of yours if we were.'

'You told us you didn't know Cornelli,' accused the Viper.

'I told you that as far as I'm aware I've never seen a man of that name in my life. Isn't that enough for you?'

'Don't give me that. We know better.'

'How very interesting. Tell me, what gives you the idea I know this man?'

'We've been back to Tomintoul. You were there asking after Cornelli.'

'Who told you that?'

'The boss o' the hotel. He said he was sick of answering questions about Cornelli.'

'That doesn't mean we were asking the questions.'

'It couldn't have been no one else.'

'Why couldn't it?'

'Because there was no one else there to ask 'em. It happened Cornelli had left, so we just missed him.'

'Bad luck. Forgive my curiosity, but why are you so anxious to find this fellow?'

'He owes us money, and plenty.'

'I see. If it's of any interest to you we saw a station wagon move off just as we arrived at Tomintoul. This man Cornelli may have been in it.'

'He was.'

'Then why aren't you looking for it?'

'We are.'

'And you expected to find it here?'

'Yeah.'

'Well, go ahead and look for it and stop worrying me with your troubles.'

'What's your business with Cornelli?'

Biggles sighed wearily. 'Why on earth should I have any business with him?'

'If you've no business with him why are you looking for him?'

'You're the one who's looking for him. Carry on. I'm not stopping you.'

‘Why did you come here if you weren’t following him?’

Biggles shook his head. ‘What a persistent fellow you are. If you must know, we came here because we happen to have our aircraft parked here.’

This obviously came as a surprise to the Viper. ‘You gotta plane?’

‘I have. So you see, if I was looking for this man Cornelli you keep on about, if he’d left here by air I’d still be following him, wouldn’t I, either in the same plane or in my own?’

The Viper looked puzzled. ‘Yeah. That’s right.’

‘Good. Now I hope you’re satisfied. Trot along and leave us alone.’

‘If—’

‘I’m not answering any more questions,’ broke in Biggles, impatiently. ‘If I have any more trouble from you I’ll tell the police you’re pestering me, and then you’ll learn we don’t stand for that sort of thing here.’

The Viper glared. ‘You try that sorta talk with me you’ll be sorry.’

‘Be careful,’ warned Biggles. ‘That’s a threat, and for that, too, in this country, you can get into trouble.’ Seeing the Viper’s hand go with an instinctive movement to his pocket Biggles went on: ‘I’ll tell you something else I think you should know. It’s illegal here to carry a lethal weapon.’

The Viper drew a deep breath. ‘Okay, wise guy. Have it your way, but don’t get in mine, or else—’

‘Else what?’

‘You’ll see.’

‘Remember what I said about threats. You’re not in America now.’

‘Who says I came from America?’

‘I do.’ Biggles smiled faintly. ‘From the way you talk you couldn’t have come from anywhere else. My advice to you is to go back.’

‘I don’t need your advice,’ growled the Viper.

‘Talking of America,’ Biggles continued, evenly. ‘How in the world did you hear of a place like Tomintoul?’

‘My pal comes from these parts so he knows his way around. He also happens to be a pal of Cornelli. Maybe that’s how. Get it?’

‘More or less. If that’s all you’d better trot along and find Cornelli.’

The Viper took a last long look at Biggles’s face. Then he turned about, and followed by his companion strode away.

As they turned the corner, Bertie, polishing his eyeglass, ‘Well, blow me down! What do you make of that?’

Biggles took out his case and lit a cigarette. ‘It’s fairly simple. We haven’t fooled them. They know we’re looking for Cornelli. What they don’t know, and what must be puzzling them, is *why*. They must also be wondering who we are. Let ‘em guess. It’ll be some time before they get the right answer. I told them nothing, and the only thing the Viper told us was this curious fact of his pal coming from these parts. I believe that. He speaks with a Scottish-American accent. There’s a hook-up there. I mean, there may have been some talk between them of Scotland in general and Tomintoul in particular. I’m

pretty sure it was the Viper who rang the Richmond Arms hotel from London asking if Cornelli was there. It would only need a word from the proprietor to Cornelli, that someone had been asking after him, to set Cornelli on the run. That's what happened. In fact, I don't see how it could have been anyone else that caused Cornelli to bolt as he did. The police would hardly be so careless. But we needn't waste time guessing about that. Cornelli heard a whisper and took fright. He's on the run, and the Viper is after him. So are we, but I haven't a clue as to where to look next.'

'Do you believe this about Cornelli owing the Viper money?' asked Ginger.

'There could be something in that. More likely those two were in the kidnapping racket, and Cornelli — we'd better call him that — ran out on them. Or Cornelli might have been financed by the gang — but what does it matter? I don't care a hang about what happens to Cornelli. It's that unfortunate boy I'm worried about. He doesn't know what he's doing, and come what may I'm afraid unless we can get hold of him first his only taste of freedom is bound to end badly for him. If Cornelli doesn't murder him, the Viper will.'

'Well, let's try to get things sorted out, old boy,' put in Bertie. 'If Cornelli and the lad didn't leave by train, or by air, they must still be in the district.'

'They could have gone by coach or they might have bought or hired another car.'

'But they handed their car in,' argued Eddie. 'They wouldn't have done that had they intended to travel by road.'

'If Cornelli thought the number of that shooting brake had been noted by anyone he wouldn't be able to get rid of it fast enough. With the Viper after him that brake was hot — too dangerous to keep.'

'The boy wouldn't understand what all the rush was about and Cornelli couldn't very well tell him,' said Ginger. 'Carlo might insist on staying in Scotland, fishing.'

'Could be,' conceded Biggles. 'Scotland isn't a big country, but it's too big for us to search without a line to work on. It isn't the only country where fishing is available. Anyway, there's nothing more we can do here. I suggest we go back to Inverness and sleep on it. We'll decide on the next move in the morning. I'll put a call through to Gaskin from the hotel and tell him what's happened. He may be able to do something. He could at least have the sea and airports watched in case Cornelli tries to leave the country. Let's go.'

They went out to the car, which was still waiting, and started back for Inverness. On the way Biggles spoke to Eddie seriously. 'I'm sorry, but you realize I can't go on with this hunt much longer. I've other things to do.'

'Sure. I understand that. It's swell of you to have given me so much of your time.'

'The trouble is, the thing could go on indefinitely,' continued Biggles. 'As I see it this run-around could last until one of two things happens. Cornelli

might get sick of carting the boy around with him or he may run short of money. One or the other is almost certain to happen eventually. I can't see Cornelli sticking a country life for long. His type belong to the cities. There's another danger for the boy there. When Cornelli gets short of cash the chances are he'll try to get some the way he's always got it, by crime; and without knowing what he's doing the kid might find himself involved in some racket and either end up in gaol or become a professional crook.'

'Cornelli wouldn't be above using him,' agreed Eddie, morosely. 'This assignment was tough enough at the start, but now Cornelli knows someone is trailing him he'll be even harder to catch up with. He knows all the tricks.'

'We've just seen an example of that in the way he bought those air tickets and didn't use 'em. The ruse succeeded. It put us off the track and I don't see how we are going to get on it again.'

'I think we've two chances,' put in Ginger. 'We know the two things the boy dotes on—flying and fishing. He may not have had enough of either so why not work on those?'

'How?'

'Let's start with fishing, because I can't help feeling that had flying been of first importance Cornelli would have used those air tickets.'

'There are a hundred rivers in Scotland where he might fish. We haven't time to tour the length of all of 'em.'

'That may not be necessary. You said yourself most of the hotels get full up. At this time of the year most of the fishings will have been taken. Any that are not will be advertised in the local papers. If Cornelli agrees to let the boy go on fishing what will he do? He can't know anything about Scottish rivers. He'll either make inquiries or look at the local papers. Why not look at the papers ourselves and see what fishing is vacant?'

'I think you've got something there,' said Biggles, approvingly. 'It's a chance. It would at least give us a line to work on. I think you're right about the flying angle. Had Cornelli been really anxious to leave Scotland he could have used those tickets and gone on anywhere, anyhow, when he got to London. The fact that he didn't use the tickets does suggest he wanted to stay here. For what reason other than to go on fishing?'

'Sure,' said Eddie, with fresh hope in his voice. 'Ginger's right. Let's start with the hotels within easy reach.'

'Okay,' agreed Biggles. 'But we shan't do much today; it's four o'clock now.'

'Well, here we are back where we started from,' he went on, as they stopped in front of the Station Hotel. 'When I've paid this taxi we'll go along to the garage where we hired that drive-yourself car and get the same one, or another. We shall then be all set for tomorrow. We can't do anything without a car.'

The taxi paid, they all walked on to the garage.

There they had a stroke of what Ginger called luck, although considering

all the circumstances there was really nothing extraordinary about it.

The garage proprietor greeted them with a smile. 'Ah! I believe you're the gentlemen who were looking for Mr Cornelli and his son.'

'That's right,' returned Biggles.

'He's been back.'

Biggles's expression changed abruptly. His face was a picture of astonishment. 'You mean — he's been back — *here*?'

'Yes.'

'When?'

'Not long ago. You just missed him.'

'Not again,' groaned Bertie.

'Why did he come back here?' questioned Biggles.

'He wanted a car.'

'What sort of car? You mean he wanted to hire one?'

'No. Not this time. He bought one.'

'The deuce he did. What was it?'

'A second-hand Morris I had here for sale.'

'Did he say why he wanted it?'

'Yes, as a matter of fact he did. Well, he told me he was going fishing and just wanted something to get him up and down the river.'

'What river?'

'I don't think he knew. He asked me what were the best fishings in these parts. Being a fisherman I could tell him.'

'Where did you suggest he went?'

'Oh, I gave him a dozen places not too far away.'

'While I remember; could you give us the number of the car you sold him?'

'Surely. PX 4001. You can't mistake it. It's been repainted light blue.'

'Did you by any chance tell him some friends were looking for him?'

'No. I meant to but I forgot. He went off in a hurry and I remembered it too late.'

'Which way did he go when he left here?'

The garage man pointed. 'I told him to go over the bridge and then turn left to follow the river.'

'What river?'

'I see you're a stranger to these parts. Our river. The Ness. Follow the river and you come to the Loch.'

'There's fishing in the Ness?'

'Of course.'

'Did you suggest it?'

'No. Mr Cornelli said he didn't want to stay in Inverness, so I thought he might try some of the smaller places farther on; perhaps try boat fishing on the Loch itself. You can hire boats for fishing.'

'What hotels are there near the Loch?'

‘I suggested they might try Drumnadrochit. That’s about fifteen miles on. There are two hotels there. Then there’s the Glenmoriston Arms at Invermorston, about twenty-seven miles, and the Lovat Arms at Fort Augustus at the far end of the Loch.’

‘How far’s that?’

‘Thirty-four miles.’

‘Thanks. That’s about as far as we shall get today.’

‘I also mentioned the Garry. That’s a nice sporting little river. Fine scenery. That’s another seven or eight miles on. You’ll see the turning on the right for Invergarry. There’s a nice little hotel there, the Invergarry. The Garry fish can run big.’

‘If I went straight on after that where would I come to?’

‘Fort William, and finally Ballachulish, on the West Coast. If you took the Invergarry road you’d be on the Road to the Isles and the Kyle of Lochalsh. I can lend you an A.A. Guide if you like.’

‘Thanks. I’m much obliged to you,’ acknowledged Biggles. ‘We really came to see you about hiring a car for a day or two.’

The man smiled. ‘You’ll need one if you’re going to tour all the places I’ve mentioned. Would you like the same car you had before — the Humber?’

‘Yes. That’ll do us fine. There’s plenty of leg room.’

‘Will you take it now?’

‘Just a minute while I have a word with my friends about it.’ Biggles turned to the others. ‘Well, what shall we do? It’s half-past four now and we’ve a lot of ground to cover. Do we spend the night here and make an early start in the morning or do we press on right away?’

‘I’m all for pushing on,’ declared Eddie, without hesitation. ‘We tried waiting the night once before and missed the boat. It doesn’t seem to get dark here till around eleven, so there’s still plenty of daylight left.’

‘That’s okay with me,’ agreed Biggles. ‘We’ll get some sandwiches in case we get stuck on the road.’

‘Here, I say, hold hard, old boy,’ put in Bertie. ‘I’ve a better idea.’

Biggles looked suspicious. ‘What is it this time?’

‘Why bother with a bally car?’

‘What else would you use — a push-bike?’

‘No jolly fear. What’s wrong with the Proctor? After all, what’s the use of an aircraft if we don’t take advantage of it — if you see what I mean?’

‘I see what you mean, but it wouldn’t work.’

‘Why is it my schemes never seem to work?’ complained Bertie, plaintively. ‘With an aircraft we could—’

‘I know. Cover the ground ten times as fast.’

‘That’s it. What’s wrong with that?’

‘Several things. In the first place it’s unlikely that the car we’re looking for is the only blue car in Scotland. Secondly, the one we’re looking for might now be under cover, in a hotel garage, for instance. But if we did spot the

right car from the air what would we do about it?’

‘We should know where it was — wouldn’t we?’

‘At that particular moment yes. So what? You can see what the country’s like. We couldn’t get down to it. It would mean going back to the aerodrome. By the time we’d done that, got a car, and driven back to where we’d last seen the car, it could be a hundred miles away.’

Bertie was not to be put off. ‘There’s a brolly in the machine. I’d put it on, and if we spotted the car I’d step out somewhere in front of it.’

‘And arrive on the top of a mountain or land in a loch.’

‘Not at all. I should be able to hit the road.’

‘And then what?’

‘I’d step out and stop the car.’

‘If it wasn’t the right one you’d look a fool.’

‘But it might be the right one.’

‘That’d be worse still. Cornelli wouldn’t stop, so you’d either be knocked flat or left standing on the road with no way of getting back to us.’

‘Oh dash it! Why do you always think of all the snags?’

‘I’ve told you before, maybe it’s a good thing for you I do. Don’t get me wrong. While I admire your zeal and your nerve, my dear chap, I’m not so taken with your notions as to let you do anything silly. Forget it. This is an occasion when we have to use a car to get about.’

Bertie sighed. ‘I don’t know why I trouble to think,’ he said, sadly.

‘Be patient, laddie. You’ll get your chance,’ promised Biggles. He turned to the garage man. ‘We’ll take the car. I’ll be back in a few minutes.’

‘Very well. I’ll have it ready. I’ll fill up with petrol and put an A.A. Guide in the panel in case you get lost.’

As they walked away Biggles said: ‘You fellows see about getting some tuck while I put a call through to the office to confirm that this jaunt is all right with the chief. I don’t think there can be anything urgent or I’d have heard from Algy. See you presently, at the garage.’

CHAPTER 7

‘SO NEAR AND YET—’

‘I’VE been on some wild goose hunts in my time, but I never started one with less hope of getting on terms with the birds,’ admitted Biggles, as they set off in the hired car, running alongside the River Ness. ‘I’ll tell you something else,’ he told Ginger, who was sitting beside him with the A.A. road map on his knees. ‘With all this car hiring the Air Commodore will take a dim view of my expense account when I send it in.’

‘It’s in a good cause,’ remarked Eddie, from behind.

‘At least we have a good road, old boy, and the weather’s fine,’ said Bertie. ‘This suits me.’

After covering seven or eight miles of what had become the Caledonian Canal the water broadened to the beginning of the Loch famous for its alleged ‘monster’.

‘What a lark if we spotted the jolly old monster,’ said Bertie, brightly.

‘The only monster I’m interested in at present is Cornelli,’ returned Biggles, soberly. ‘What I’m afraid of is, if he finds the pursuit getting too hot for him, or should that unfortunate boy demand to be told the reason for all this rushing about, he may murder him. There are plenty of lonely places here where he might get away with it. In his heart he must hate the lad, the son of the man he’s really trying to hurt. Let’s not forget that as a gangster he’s probably been involved in more than one killing.’

‘Oh, come off it, old boy,’ protested Bertie. ‘Why be so depressing? If you go on like that you’ll have me bursting into tears.’

‘Well, don’t do it here,’ answered Biggles. He smiled faintly. ‘When I was at school the Head had a favourite phrase I’ve never forgotten. He used to say: “If you must cry, boy, cry in your bed where people can’t see you. They’re not interested in your troubles.” But this looks like that place — what do they call it — Drumnadrochit. Watch for a light blue car. If we don’t see it outside one of the hotels we shall have to ask inside. At this time of day, if Cornelli’s here, it might be standing outside. We shall have to be careful how we go about it. You can be sure Cornelli’s ears will be wide open.’

They found neither Cornelli nor his car at Drumnadrochit. Biggles hesitated at the side road at the Lewiston Arms Hotel, but saying it was all a matter of luck went on down the Loch.

‘We shouldn’t lose sight of the possibility that Cornelli never had the slightest intention of coming this way,’ he remarked. ‘I mean, if he suspects he’s being followed, what he said to that garage man may have been a deliberate attempt to cover up his track. He might have started this way and doubled back. He might go anywhere. The fact that he now has his own car makes him independent of all public services.’

‘If he intended returning to Inverness he wouldn’t have bought a car, he’d have hired one,’ reasoned Eddie.

‘True enough. The fact that he *has* bought a car suggests he means to go some distance. If that’s so we’re wasting our time. I’d do better to ring Gaskin and get him to try to trace the car by routine methods. But just in case we should catch up with them, Eddie, you’d better tell me what you intend to do.’

‘I shall tell the boy the truth and ask him to come home with me.’

‘And if he refuses?’

‘I shall contact our Embassy in London. They know all about the boy being kidnapped. I imagine they’d ask your head people in London to take action.’

‘Fair enough.’

‘The boy’s passion for fishing may influence Cornelli in what he does. The only way to get him away from these rivers would be to suggest they did some flying.’

Bertie stepped in. ‘I say, chaps, I’ve a notion we’re being followed.’

‘By what?’ asked Biggles sharply.

‘A black saloon car. It’s keeping the same distance behind us. Twice when you’ve slowed down a bit, it has done the same thing.’

‘Well — well. There’s only one man likely to follow us.’

‘If the Viper thinks we’re following a clue, he won’t take his eyes off us,’ declared Eddie.

‘I suppose he could have shadowed us. We’ll soon settle it. I’ll pull up and have a look at the Loch. We might be tourists looking for the monster.’

Biggles ran the car close in to the curb and allowed it to run to a stop. The Loch, perhaps a hundred feet below, still stretched away to left and right. One or two small craft were on it, the occupants presumably fishing.

‘The guy behind us has stopped,’ Eddie informed them.

Biggles cruised on a little way and stopped again.

‘That’s it,’ said Eddie, shortly. ‘He’s stopped. That settles any argument. That’s the Viper all right. What do we do about it?’

Biggles lit a cigarette. ‘I don’t see that we can do anything about it.’

‘Oh, nuts to that,’ snapped Eddie. ‘I’ll go and tell him to pack up.’

‘He’ll laugh in your face. If he thinks we’re on a hot scent he’ll stay with us, and short of shooting a hole in one of his tyres, which legally would put us in the wrong, I don’t see how we can stop him. We have one advantage over him and maybe he suspects it.’

‘What is it?’

‘We have a description of Cornelli’s car. He hasn’t, or he wouldn’t trouble to tail us. He’d be hunting on his own account.’ As he finished speaking Biggles let in the clutch and cruised on.

‘What are you going to do?’ asked Ginger.

‘Carry on with what we were doing. If we don’t find Cornelli the Viper will have wasted his time.’

‘And if we should find him?’

‘We’ll deal with that situation when it arises. If it comes to a showdown, and the Viper tries to use force, we should be able to show him where he steps off.’

To the astonishment of everyone in the Humber this arose within the next five minutes.

Standing well tucked in the side of the road, facing them, on the loch side, was a light blue car, which presently could be identified as a Morris. Its number was PX 4001. In a word, it was the car they were looking for.

Eddie let out a cry of delight. ‘We’ve got ‘em.’

‘Not quite,’ said Biggles, cautiously.

‘Well, chase Aunt Annie round the gasworks!’ exclaimed Bertie. ‘Would you believe it?’

‘I’m ready to believe anything,’ asserted Biggles. ‘One thing’s certain. They can’t be far away.’

‘They must be down beside the water.’

‘We’ll soon see.’ Biggles swung the Humber round across the road and brought it to a stop close behind the Morris. He jumped out and confirmed there was no one in it. With the rest, who had followed him, he walked to the top of the bank that overlooked the Loch.

The broad stretch of water, as flat as a sheet of glass, now lay about two hundred feet below at the bottom of a steep rocky slope covered with a dense growth of bushes and young trees. Through this jungle, bordered by rank moss, a narrow track zigzagged down to a boat-house and a short wooden jetty. There was no one there. On the water, stationary, and perhaps a quarter of a mile out, floated a boat a trifle larger than an ordinary dinghy. In it were two people. One, the smaller, was casting with a rod. The other sat in the stern, one arm resting on the tiller. An object behind him looked like an outboard motor, and this in fact it turned out to be.

‘That’s ‘em!’ exclaimed Eddie, in a voice pitched high with excitement. ‘We’ve got ‘em. All we have to do is wait here for ‘em to come back to their car.’

Biggles glanced back along the road. ‘That black saloon has stopped.’

‘So what? They can’t know this Morris is Cornelli’s. Nor can they from here recognize the people in the boat. It’s too far away. They may imagine we’ve merely stopped here to admire the scenery.’

They’ll think differently when they see Cornelli and the boy come up to the car.’

‘Then let’s go down to the jetty and wait there.’

‘That’s a better idea.’

‘What about our car?’ queried Ginger. ‘Can we leave it here?’

‘I don’t think the Viper’s likely to interfere with it. He’s nothing to gain by that. He’s following us. He wants to know where we’re going. By immobilizing our car he’d defeat his object. Let’s go down.’

In single file they made their way down to the water, and there, having

nothing to do except wait, they found seats on the bank.

‘They must have got the key of the boat-house from some hotel, possibly in Fort Augustus,’ remarked Biggles. ‘Or, of course, they may have hired the boat from a house beside the Loch where boats are let out to fishermen.’

They waited for half an hour, watching the boy fishing. He caught nothing. Then came the sound for which they had all been hoping — the unmistakable noise of a reel when the line is wound in. The outboard motor was started and the boat began chugging its way towards the jetty.

‘Here they come,’ breathed Eddie. ‘I don’t think it matters if they see us. They can’t know any of us by sight.’

Biggles agreed.

The boat came on, rippling the calm water, and it was soon possible to recognize the occupants. All possible doubt was then settled. They were the man who now called himself Cornelli, and the boy he had kidnapped.

‘It’s them all right,’ declared Eddie, with intense satisfaction. They can’t get away from us now.’

Then something unexpected happened. The boat was not more than thirty yards distant when Cornelli put the tiller hard over, with the result that the little craft yawed wildly as it turned away.

Biggles sprang to his feet. ‘What’s he doing?’

A curse behind caused him to spin round, when Cornelli’s behaviour was at once explained. The Viper and his companion were standing there, in plain view, only two or three paces away. Apparently they had just arrived on the scene and Cornelli could not have failed to see them.

The Viper had an automatic in his hand. He shouted to Cornelli to come back or he’d shoot. Cornelli ignored the threat, except to crouch low, a sure indication that he had heard it. The Viper took aim. Ginger, not six yards away, snatched up a lump of rock and threw it. It struck the Viper on the side of the head. He staggered, stumbled and fell. The gun flew out of his hand. Biggles jumped forward, snatched it up and tossed it into the Loch. Cursing luridly the Viper scrambled to his feet. Bertie knocked him down again. Eddie was wrestling with the other man.

‘All right! That’s enough,’ shouted Biggles.

The boat, running parallel with the shore, close in, could no longer be seen, but the put-put-put of its motor could be heard receding. The tangle of undergrowth, which ran right down to the edge of the water, made it impossible to follow along the bank.

Breathing heavily the opposing sides faced each other, the Viper with a hand to his head where the rock had struck. He was white with passion. Biggles, too, was pale with anger.

‘I’ll get you for this,’ rasped the Viper, glaring at Biggles.

‘What do you mean by following me?’ flung back Biggles.

‘I’ll—’ The Viper nearly choked.

‘Shut up,’ snapped Biggles. ‘You’re not in America now. One more word

from you and I'll have you arrested for carrying a gun.'

Silence fell. Ginger could no longer hear the boat.

Then Eddie, looking at Biggles, said quietly: 'They'll have to come back for their car.'

'They won't land here now,' returned Biggles. 'I wonder can they get ashore lower down the Loch?'

All this was said in front of the Viper. As he was still standing there it could not be avoided.

'We'd better get up to the road,' decided Eddie.

The Viper made a quick move towards the path, but Bertie was faster and blocked his way. 'Not so fast,' he said, tartly.

Biggles hesitated, and the reason must have been plain to everyone. Such a situation could not have been foreseen and it presented a problem for which there appeared to be no answer. It was obvious that the two gangsters would make for the road at the first opportunity and there was no legitimate way of preventing this. In the matter of numbers they were outmatched two to one, but short of a resumption of violence this made no difference. The Viper had lost his gun. Whether or not his associate carried one was not known. Assuming he had one, so far, for reasons known only to himself, he had not produced it. He may have hesitated to take on four men who, for all he knew, might also carry guns. But this was surmise.

Then, as they all stood there, from above came a sound that startled everyone into swift movement. It was the whirr of a car starter. Ignoring the Viper Biggles tore up the path with the others close behind. Ginger supposed the gangsters would follow them, but he did not look round to confirm it, one reason being that he had to watch his step on the steep rocky path, and another, he was in no position to prevent it, anyway. When he reached the road it was to find Biggles already in their own car, starting the engine. The blue Morris had gone.

'Get in,' said Biggles, curtly. 'The Morris didn't turn or we'd have heard it shunt. It must have gone this way. Let's get after it.'

'What about the Viper?' asked Eddie, as they all scrambled into their seats.

'He can do what he likes. We've no time to stand and argue.'

'He'll follow.'

'Let him. The thing is for us to get to the boy first.'

The doors were slammed and the Humber raced down the broad highway in the direction from which it had come.

'That's the second time we've missed 'em by inches,' muttered Eddie, savagely. 'All because those two skunks had to follow us down the path and show themselves.'

'Cornelli wasn't long recognizing 'em.'

'You bet he wasn't. He knew what that meant.'

'He must have guessed we'd wait at the jetty, so he ran the boat ashore farther along at a place where he could get up the bank to the road. It seems

that the boy is still content to remain with him.'

'We don't know what tale he's told the boy.'

'Meanwhile, we're still going round in circles.'

'You think Cornelli's going back to Inverness?'

'I'd say he'll only do that if there's no alternative.'

There's that turning at Invermoriston,' reminded Ginger, referring again to the map in the A.A. book.

'That's where we shall have to start guessing again.'

'If he takes that road he'll have a long run in front of him to the Kyle of Lochalsh. The only road leading off it is at a place called Cluanie, about twenty miles on. It doubles back on itself and rejoins the main road a few miles from Fort Augustus.'

'No doubt Cornelli will drive fast, but there's a chance we may overtake him.'

Bertie, after a glance through the rear window, chipped in: 'That black saloon's on our tail. The Viper is still with us.'

'You can bet he'll stay with us while he can,' growled Eddie. 'What beats me, Biggles, is why you don't arrest him here and now.'

'I've told you why. I've no warrant for his arrest, and until he commits a felony it's unlikely that one would be issued.'

'But the United States Embassy in London—'

'Let's get the boy. We can talk afterwards.'

'Steady,' warned Ginger. 'Here's the Glen Moriston road just in front, on the left.'

At the junction they had a small slice of luck. Outside the hotel, the Glen Moriston Arms, a man was doing something to a car. Biggles pulled up level with him. 'Have you noticed a light blue car come this way?' he inquired.

'A Morris?'

'That's right.'

The man pointed up the glen road. 'Yes. That's the way it went.'

'Thanks.'

Biggles drove on. 'Here we go again,' he sighed. 'I didn't think Cornelli would head straight back to Inverness.'

'I wonder if he knows he's heading for the West Coast?' queried Ginger.

'I don't suppose he cares where he's heading for as long as he can throw the Viper off his track,' ventured Biggles, grimly. 'If ever I saw a killer, that man's one.'

'They're all killers, and that includes Cornelli,' stated Eddie.

'The black saloon's still with us,' Bertie informed them.

Biggles's foot went down on the accelerator. 'Let's see if we can lose it, but I have my doubts.'

With Loch Ness now behind it, the Humber leapt forward on a good, heather-fringed, metal-surfaced road, that ran steadily uphill across open country. There was a clear view ahead for a considerable distance but no blue

car — nor, for that matter, any other vehicle.

‘How far did you say it was before we come to a turning?’ Biggles asked Ginger.

‘As near as I can judge, from the map, about twenty miles.’

‘We ought to be able to overtake the Morris in that distance,’ said Eddie, confidently.

‘It had at least five minutes start, and in that time a car can cover a lot of ground,’ answered Biggles, dubiously.

The Humber sped on, always climbing up a long hill, across a landscape now turning softly pink and gold in the misty light of the westering sun.

CHAPTER 8

THE HIGH ROAD AND THE LOW

THEY saw the Morris before they came to the fork. Ginger spotted it more or less by accident. At least, he was not looking for it when he saw it; nor could he have imagined it being where he did see it. Happening to glance out of the side window on his left to where, at some distance, a towering heather-covered hillside rose up to cut a curve against the sky, he saw, to his amazement, a blue car streaking diagonally across it, travelling in almost the opposite direction to themselves. He couldn't see a road, but realized there must be one.

There they are!' he cried.

'That's swell!' exclaimed Eddie. 'We'll catch 'em.'

His optimism was understandable, because at that moment the Morris was less than a quarter of a mile away. That is, in a straight line. But it was on the far side of a treeless glen, some two or three hundred feet above them, and between them yawned a deep if narrow valley with water at the bottom.

It had yet to be learned that the distance between the two cars, by road, was more like three to four miles. The Humber, of course, could only follow the road, and this continued on for the best part of two miles before the dividing glen narrowed and a bridge enabled them to take the road the Morris was on. There a hairpin bend took the road back almost on itself, climbing steeply up the flank of the opposite hill. The road they were on carried straight on at the fork.

As Biggles turned at full lock to take the hairpin bend he remarked: 'At least we know which way they've gone. Where does this road lead?'

Ginger studied the map. 'To Glen Garry. It joins the main road again at Invergarry, about five or six miles from Fort Augustus.'

'Which means we would then be back nearly to where we saw Cornelli in the boat.'

'That's right.'

'So we're still going round in circles,' muttered Biggles. 'I shall soon be round the bend myself if this goes on much longer. Are there any side turnings?'

'Not until you come to Invergarry and the main road. You can then please yourself whether you turn left or right. Unless you can catch them before we get there we shan't know which way they've gone.'

'How far is Invergarry?'

'For a rough guess about twenty miles.'

'Then we might just do it. Good thing that garage man topped us up with petrol before we started.'

'The black saloon is still behind us,' said Bertie.

‘As we could see the Morris no doubt they saw it, too. If it comes to that, I imagine Cornelli also saw us. He must be wondering who we are, but having seen the Viper down there by the side of Loch Ness he’s not likely to stop to ask us. He’ll keep going till he thinks he’s reasonably safe.’

The road they were now on was different from the one they had left. For a mountain road it had a fair surface, but it was very narrow. It was in fact a single-lane track, so narrow that passing or overtaking was impossible except where, at intervals of a few hundred yards, cuttings in the side had been made for that purpose. There were snow-posts, too, to mark the course of the road when the snow was down in winter. This was understandable, for the road, climbing steeply all the time, had reached an altitude from which a wild, majestic scene unfolded, particularly towards the west, where the peaks of the Five Sisters, still streaked with snow, were thrust high into the sky. However, they were some distance away. Between them and the road, that is, on the right-hand side of the car, for a mile or more the ground fell away into a tremendous hollow with a loch at the bottom. A herd of deer could be seen standing knee deep in the water.

On the opposite side of the road the view was nearly as impressive, with heather-covered slopes falling into Glen Moriston, through which ran the road from Loch Ness — the road they had originally been on. The Humber was, in fact, racing across the top of what is sometimes called a saddle.

The highest point having been passed the ground began to drop away in a series of switchback descents with occasional level stretches; and it was on one of these that an incident occurred which annoyed Biggles very much. He blamed himself, but the others found excuses for him. What happened was this.

Since leaving Loch Ness they had not seen a single other vehicle apart from those engaged in the chase. There now appeared in front another car — actually, it was a jeep — and as there was a pull-in just in front of him Biggles turned into it and stopped to allow the jeep to pass. The delay, if only for a few seconds, was irritating, but for Biggles there was no alternative. It was up to him, by the rule of such roads, to give way, and in so doing he did the correct thing. It did not occur to him to do otherwise. The driver of the jeep, seeing him do this, came on, as was his right.

The Viper may or may not have known this. Even if he did not know he must have seen what was happening. It made no difference. He employed ‘rushing’ tactics, as some drivers always will. In a flash the black saloon had shot past the Humber standing in the siding. The thing was done before any steps could be taken to prevent it. The driver of the jeep, seeing this happen, had to stop to prevent a head-on collision. He had to do more than that. Seeing that the black car had no intention of giving way he had to back to the nearest pull-in behind him to allow it to pass, which, of course, it did. It then went straight on. Biggles, for his part, had to wait for the jeep to go by before he could proceed. The time lost was about two minutes. By then the Viper’s car

had disappeared over the brow of the next hill.

‘The swine,’ muttered Biggles furiously. ‘That’s how accidents happen. No wonder the local people get browned off with tourists who behave like that.’

‘You did the right thing, old boy,’ consoled Bertie.

‘Frankly, it never occurred to me that the Viper might pull a trick like that. I thought he was following us. He must have seen the Morris when we did, so that was no longer necessary.’

It will be noticed that the effect of this slick manoeuvre on the part of the Viper was to reverse the position of the two cars, his own and Biggles’s. This, naturally, did not please Biggles, who up to this time had had the comfort of knowing that the Viper could not reach Cornelli before he did. Now he himself could not reach the blue Morris without first overtaking the black saloon, and this, on such a road, would only be possible if the Viper was prepared to permit it. That was so unlikely as not to be worth considering, since the Viper had deliberately taken a risk to obtain the position he now held.

All Biggles could do was race on after the black saloon, now nearly half a mile in front of him and from time to time disappearing from sight over the brows of the several hills, mostly descending. Nor could anything be seen of the Morris, which Ginger reckoned was still at least two or three miles ahead of them. The road continued downhill with occasional short runs of level ground.

It was on one of these stretches that the Viper’s car began behaving in a manner least expected. It slowed down, almost allowing Biggles to catch up with it. At the next downhill run it went on again. This happened three times.

‘What the dickens is he doing?’ said Biggles suspiciously. ‘I smell another trick.’

‘I’d say he’s looking for the right place to stop us,’ surmised Eddie.

‘But why? Why stop us? It’s Cornelli he wants, not us. If he goes on like this he’ll lose him altogether.’

‘So shall we,’ murmured Ginger despondently.

The explanation was forthcoming, and it looked as if Eddie’s guess had been right, when on an unusually long level stretch of road the black saloon ran slowly to a standstill.

‘Now what?’ said Biggles tersely.

‘He’s stopped in the middle of the road so he’s no intention of letting us go past,’ observed Ginger.

Eddie frowned. ‘I don’t get it.’

‘We shall soon know,’ returned Biggles, pulling up behind the saloon, as, since he could not pass, he had to.

By that time the two occupants of the saloon had got out, leaving the doors open. The Viper stood with one foot on the running board, leaning against the body in a nonchalant attitude, calmly picking his teeth with a toothpick of some sort.

Biggles lost no time in dismounting. 'What the devil do you think you're doing?' he rasped, for he was really angry.

The Viper's lips curled in a curious, sardonic, half-apologetic grin. 'We're out of gas,' he stated, almost casually.

So that was it, thought Ginger. Considering the distance the saloon had travelled, unless it had started with plenty of petrol in the tank this seemed not unlikely, although such a possibility had not occurred to any of them. Anyway, he could think of no reason why the car should have stopped unless compelled by mechanical trouble to do so.

Biggles may have thought this, too, but that he was still suspicious was shown when he snapped: 'You're lying.'

'Okay, so I'm lying,' returned the Viper, smoothly. 'Look for yourself.'

Biggles declined the invitation. 'Get off the road.'

'A car won't move without gas. It's time you knew that.'

'You deliberately blocked the road.'

'So what are you going to do about it?'

'Push you off it. This is a public highway. We're not the only people using it.'

'Okay. Go right ahead,' sneered the Viper.

Biggles realized what the gangster had obviously realized. This delay would mean that all hope of catching the Morris had gone; at all events before it reached the main road, when it might turn to the east or the western side of the country. The Viper was evidently satisfied that if he couldn't overtake Cornelli neither could the Humber. Perceiving the futility of continuing the chase Biggles changed his attitude. He shrugged as if accepting the situation — as indeed he had to — and asked, curiously: 'What's your interest in Cornelli?'

'You mean that double-crossing son-of-a-bitch who calls himself Cornelli,' corrected the Viper, viciously.

'How do you know his name isn't Cornelli?' inquired Biggles, seeking any information that might be useful.

'How do I know? Like a mug I fixed his phony passport for him. That's how I know.'

'Well?'

'He owes us ten grand.'

Biggles stared. This was news. 'For what?'

'The money didn't belong to him. It belonged to all of us. He knew where it was. He lifted it and skipped with the lot. He's not getting away with that.'

'What else?'

'There was the kid.'

'What about the kid?'

'The play was he should get him and we'd all share what his pop would pay to have him back; instead of which he went off on his own, taking the kid with him. We'll get him.'

‘I see,’ said Biggles, slowly, thinking this sounded like the truth.

The Viper went on. ‘You’re asking a lot o’ questions, mister. What’s your angle?’

‘As a matter of fact I’m a police officer,’ replied Biggles, evenly.

‘So that’s it! You’re a cop. But you ain’t got nothing on us,’ said the Viper, sharply.

‘I didn’t say I had. If I had you’d have been under arrest before this. I’m not interested in Cornelli. The Federal Police will no doubt deal with him in due course. All I want is the boy, before he comes to any harm. He’s not safe with Cornelli.’

‘Are you telling me?’ The Viper put his toothpick away, and cleverly flicking a cigarette from a pack, lit it. ‘Well, now we know how we stand,’ he went on. ‘You’d got us guessing. So you’re a cop. Well, that’s okay with me. What you aim to do now?’

‘Push your car out of the way and move on.’

‘What about us?’

‘What about you?’

‘You ain’t goin’ to leave us here on this goddam prairie.’

‘What do you expect me to do — give you a lift?’

‘Sure.’

‘Forget it.’

‘Then give us some gas, enough to get some place.’

‘You’ve got a nerve. I haven’t any spare, and wouldn’t give it to you if I had.’

‘Then give us a tow to the top o’ the next hill. Mebbe we could cruise on to some place where we could get gas.’

‘Nothing doing. Unless you want to stay here all night you’d better start walking. Another car may come along, but as you may have noticed, traffic on this road isn’t exactly jamming itself up.’ As he finished speaking Biggles advanced purposefully to the black saloon. ‘Come on, you fellows. Give it a push,’ he told the others. ‘Ginger, you get to the wheel of our car and don’t leave it. Bring it through as soon as we’ve made room.’

‘Okay.’

The Viper’s thin lips came together in a hard line and his eyes glinted dangerously. ‘You know, mister, it’s lucky for you I lost my gun, and my pal had his took off him when we came through your Customs office. Mebbe I’ll have one next time we meet.’

‘Maybe I’ll have one, too,’ returned Biggles.

Ginger now understood why the Viper’s companion had not made a move, or taken part in the argument. He was unarmed. It may have been that the two gangsters thought Biggles’s party carried guns. They were not to know otherwise. Fist fighting, two against four, apparently did not appeal to them. At all events, neither made any attempt to prevent their car from being manhandled off the road on to the heather. They stood aside, smoking,

watching the operation with dead-pan expressions. Not another word was spoken. As soon as the gap was wide enough to get through, Ginger took the Humber on a little way. The others got in. Ginger drove on, leaving the gangsters, standing beside their car, staring after them.

‘Pity about that,’ said Biggles, after a minute. ‘There’s no need to hurry now. The Morris must be miles away, and we haven’t a clue as to which way it’s likely to go.’

Twilight was beginning to close in by the time they reached the main road.

Ginger stopped at the junction. ‘Now which way?’ he asked. ‘Do we turn left or right?’

‘I don’t think it matters,’ answered Biggles. ‘Still, I can’t see any point in racing haphazard round the West Coast over roads we don’t even know. We should probably end up by running out of petrol ourselves and spending the night in the car. Cornelli has the whole of Scotland to choose from. Now that he knows for certain the Viper is hot on his trail he might even carry right on to London in the hope of giving him the slip in the crowd.’

‘Well, what’s it to be?’

‘I think we might as well go back to Inverness and stay the night there. That’ll give us time to think things over. We shall have to spend the night somewhere and the nearer we are to Dalcross and the aircraft the better, in case we should decide to fly back home in the morning. I’ll have a word with Gaskin as soon as I can get hold of him on the phone. Has anyone else any ideas?’

No one spoke.

‘Okay.’ Ginger turned left and started back along the scenic road that keeps in close touch with Scotland’s best-known loch, Loch Ness, for its entire length. Not much of it could be seen, for dusk was now dimming the picture.

‘Are you taking the car to the hotel or back to the garage?’ inquired Ginger, as they crossed the bridge into the town.

‘To the hotel. It’s unlikely there’ll be anyone at the garage at this hour. We’ll take the car back in the morning, unless we decide to use it again.’

‘It looks as if we shall have to start the whole business afresh,’ remarked Eddie, despondently.

‘That’s the way these things go.’

‘After a promising start it’s been a wasted day.’

‘Not altogether. We know why the Viper’s looking for Cornelli. Don’t worry. There’s always tomorrow. If we’re temporarily stumped, so is the Viper,’ Biggles reminded them. ‘His chances of picking up the trail are even lower than ours. We at least have Gaskin to fall back on. He has no one but himself.’

‘That’s something,’ agreed Eddie, without enthusiasm, as the car ran to a stop outside the hotel.

CHAPTER 9



CHAPTER 9

SHOCKS, AND MORE SHOCKS

IT was at breakfast the following morning, a little after nine o'clock, when Biggles had the first of a series of shocks.

The others were at the table when he joined them after being for some minutes on the telephone to Scotland Yard. 'I've had a talk with Gaskin,' he said. 'He knows what has happened. I've given him the number of the blue Morris and he's having all roads into London, from the north, watched.'

'Why London?' asked Ginger.

'He can't get watchers on every road in the country in five minutes. He's putting out a general call, but he agrees with me that if Cornelli is leaving Scotland sooner or later he'll make for London. Of course, he could get back to the States from Prestwick, but I can't see him doing that.'

The others agreed.

As the waiter put Biggles's plate of bacon and eggs in front of him he remarked: 'That was a funny business on the Road to the Isles last night, sir.'

'Indeed,' replied Biggles, not particularly interested. Then the name of the road struck his memory and he asked sharply: 'Why, what happened?'

'Mr Macpherson, of the Forestry Commission at Invergarry, was knocked down and had his car stolen. We don't often get that sort of thing here. Everyone's talking about it.'

Biggles put down his knife and fork. 'Tell me what happened. We were on that road last night.'

'Then you may have seen Mr Macpherson's jeep.'

‘We saw a jeep. What’s all this about?’

The waiter was willing to talk about the subject uppermost in his mind, as are most people when the news is local. ‘It seems that Mr Macpherson went over the road to Cluanie to give orders to some foresters he has working there. On his way back he was stopped by two men, strangers they were, walking along the road. It was after dark and he couldn’t see them very well. He was alone in the car, and thinking the men wanted a lift he stopped to pick them up. The men knocked him down and took the jeep, leaving him to walk all the way home to his house at Invergarry. I don’t know what things are coming to. You can’t trust anyone these days.’

‘What about the jeep? Has it been found?’

‘No. It has disappeared. The police are looking for it.’

‘Is that all you know?’

‘That’s all, sir. I thought you might be interested if you intended going that way.’

‘Thank you.’

The waiter retired.

‘So the Viper didn’t walk home last night after all,’ Biggles said softly, looking at the others in turn.

‘That sure sounds like the Viper,’ surmised Eddie.

‘I think we shall have to tell the police what we know,’ went on Biggles. ‘I wish I’d known about this a few minutes ago. I’d have told Gaskin. Not that it’s particularly important. It’s Cornelli, not the Viper, I want.’

‘How did you leave things with Gaskin?’ asked Bertie.

‘He said if he had any news he’d ring me here. I told him if I’d heard nothing by twelve noon I’d probably fly back to London to see him.’

‘But look here, old boy. Even if Cornelli had driven straight on last night he wouldn’t have got to London yet. He’d have to stop several times, if only for petrol.’

‘I realize that. So does Gaskin. But the Morris could have got as far as Scotch Corner, just south of Darlington, where the two main roads from Scotland to London meet. There’s a hotel there. Cornelli might stop for food or a rest. He wouldn’t try to do the five hundred and fifty miles without a break. Gaskin has a man watching Scotch Corner so he should see the Morris whichever road Cornelli takes. If he sees it he’ll phone Gaskin and Gaskin will phone me here. If that should happen we shall at least know which way the bird has flown, and it won’t be necessary to hang about here any longer. Meanwhile, as we’re not likely to need it again we might as well take the Humber back to the garage. There’s no sense in paying for it if we’re not going to use it. There’s no great hurry. We shall have to stay here till twelve in case Gaskin comes through. You stand fast to take the call while I slip round to the police station and tell them who was probably responsible for the hold-up on the Invergarry road last night.’

Biggles went off. When, a little later, he came back, he was told Gaskin

had not rung up. 'I've given the police a description of the Viper and his pal,' he told the others. 'I couldn't do less. I didn't tell them more than was necessary. I mean, I didn't say anything about us being involved. Well, it's twelve o'clock. Let's take the car back to the garage.'

There a second shock awaited them, one which for a moment left Biggles speechless. Standing on the concrete apron by the petrol pumps was the blue Morris. That it was the Morris was proved by its number.

Smiling, the garage proprietor came over to them.

Biggles groped for words. He pointed at the Morris. 'How did that get here?'

'You've just missed your friends again,' he was told.

'You mean Mr Cornelli?'

'Aye. I told him you were looking for him.'

'When did he bring the car back?'

'About two hours ago.'

'Why did he bring it back? I understood you to say he'd bought it.'

'So he did. But he rang me up early this morning and said urgent business at home had called for a change of plan. It meant he'd have to cut short his holiday. He wanted to know if I'd buy the car back from him. I said yes, provided it hadn't been damaged. I offered to give him what he'd paid for it less a few pounds for the time he'd had the use of it. He said he'd bring it over right away. He did, and he must have travelled fast.'

'Where did he phone from?'

'Fort William.'

'How far away is that?'

'Sixty-six miles. He did it in well under two hours.'

'Was he here long?'

'No. Only a few minutes. He said he was in a hurry to get on home. I was waiting with the money. I had a look over the car, paid him, and off he went.'

'Did he say where he was going?'

'No. He walked off into the town and that was the last I saw of him.'

'Thank you. I'm much obliged.' Biggles forced a smile. 'Bad luck just missing him again.' He paid for the hire of the Humber and turned away.

'Gaskin will be getting severely browned off with me,' he said wearily, as they walked towards the hotel. 'Here he is, watching the roads for a car that's been under our noses all the time.'

'Can you beat it?' muttered Eddie. 'Who would have thought he'd come back here?'

'I certainly wouldn't, for one.'

'Why did he?'

'Apparently to sell the car. It would be worth a few hundred pounds and he wouldn't want to lose too much money on the resale. I imagine he thought he'd get a better price from the man from whom he'd bought it than from anyone else. Apart from that, the man knew him, and the car. Cornelli might

have found it difficult to sell the car anywhere else. He may have tried. You can't just drive up to a stranger and say, "How much will you give me for this car?" With so many cars being stolen most garages today want to know a few things about the car — and the man who's trying to sell it.'

'Cornelli must have turned to the right, last night, when we turned to the left to come back to Inverness,' remarked Ginger.

'I don't think we need blame ourselves for that. It would have been a waste of time to look for him in the dark, when one car looks much like another. For all we knew he might have gone on to Glasgow before he stopped. But we needn't waste time talking about that now.'

'He rang up from Fort William.'

'That doesn't necessarily mean he spent the night there. What if he did? He's succeeded in giving everyone the slip. That car was our only clue.'

'Why did he sell it?'

'Either he didn't want a car any more, or, what's more likely, he decided that particular one was too hot for him. It was too conspicuous. He knew the Viper must have seen it on the road beside Loch Ness. He also knew he was being followed last night when he doubled back to Invergarry. No, he couldn't get rid of that Morris fast enough.'

By this time they were back at the hotel. There was no message from Inspector Gaskin.

'So what do we do next?' asked Eddie, in a melancholy voice.

'Without having the least idea of where Cornelli might be I feel like flying back to London and having a word with Gaskin.'

'Hadn't you better ring him up to tell him to call off his watch for the Morris?' suggested Ginger.

'It would be nearly as quick to fly to London when we could explain the whole miserable business. I'll pay the bill here and we'll move off.'

'Seems sorta tough, having to give up, having been so close to 'em,' remarked Eddie morosely.

'I didn't say anything about giving up,' returned Biggles, shortly. 'One of you go out and get a taxi while I settle up here.'

In a few minutes they were on their way.

At the aerodrome another shock was waiting for them.

An official came over to them. 'Weren't you asking about a Mr Cornelli, who booked seats on the London plane and didn't take them up?'

'That's right,' confirmed Biggles.

'Have you seen him?'

'No.'

'Then it looks as if you've just missed him.'

Biggles stared. 'What do you mean?'

'He left here this morning on the London flight.' The official smiled. 'He really went this time. I thought you'd like to know.' The man walked on.

Biggles looked at the others helplessly. 'This kills me. So *that's* why he

sold the car. He really *has* gone to London. Change of plan, eh. After seeing the Viper with a gun in his hand I'm not surprised. What's the matter with me? My brain must be turning to spaghetti or I'd have guessed he'd get the fastest way out of Scotland.'

'What are the chances of overtaking the plane?' asked Eddie.

'None. Not an earthly.' Biggles suddenly came to life. 'But there's one thing we can do. Call Gaskin, or Algy if Gaskin isn't in his office, and have someone meet the plane. Stand fast while I phone.' He went off at a run towards the administrative offices.

He came back in about ten minutes. 'Okay,' he announced. 'I caught Gaskin. He's laying on a man to watch Cornelli when the plane lands. I told him we'd found the Morris. In fact, I gave him the latest gen. Let's get mobile.'

They hurried to the hangar where the Proctor had been housed, and having confirmed that it had been serviced, were soon in the air heading south on full throttle.

At three-thirty they walked into Air Police Headquarters at Scotland Yard. Algy was sitting there alone. 'Have you seen Gaskin?' asked Biggles, quickly.

'No.'

Biggles picked up the intercom, telephone. 'Inspector Gaskin's office, please. Thank you.' He listened for a moment and replaced the receiver. 'He's coming up,' he said.

Two minutes later the Inspector walked in, bringing with him, although Biggles was blissfully unaware of it, yet another shock.

'Well, what news?' asked Biggles, impatiently.

'Don't get in such a sweat. It's all right. He was on the plane.'

'Of course he was. We know that.' Then a thought seemed to strike Biggles. 'Did you say *he* was on the plane?'

'I did.'

'Who do you mean?'

'Cornelli.'

'Don't you mean *they* were on it?'

'Meaning who?'

'Cornelli and the boy.'

'There was no boy. Cornelli was alone.'

Biggles sank limply into his chair. 'You're quite sure the boy wasn't there?'

'If he had been we'd have seen him. There were only four other passengers.'

'Where did Cornelli go?'

'To the Grosvenor, outside Victoria station.'

Biggles buried his face in his hands. 'Give me a minute to get over this,' he pleaded.

Gaskin, imperturbable, took out his pipe, blew through the stem and filled

it from the tin he always carried.

Biggles drew a deep breath and looked up. 'This is getting me down,' he said heavily. 'My skull seems to be in a sort of deep-freeze.'

'Why? What's gone wrong?' inquired Gaskin, evenly.

'Everything. I don't care two hoots about Cornelli. It's the boy I want.'

'I don't see how we were to know the boy wasn't on the plane,' said Ginger, trying to find excuses.

'You don't! I do.'

'I don't get it,' put in Eddie.

'Listen,' returned Biggles, grimly. 'What did that chap tell us when we were at Dalcross?'

'He said Cornelli was on the plane.'

'Exactly. Cornelli. He didn't say a word about the boy. He said *he*, not *they*. We assumed the boy was there. Not one of us had the wit to ask if the boy was with him. As I've said before, at this game it doesn't do to assume anything — particularly when you're dealing with a professional crook.'

'Looks like Cornelli's pulled another fast one,' growled Eddie, dejectedly.

'It's not that he's so smart. Let's face it. We haven't been very bright.'

'What else could we have done?'

'We bungled it twice,' went on Biggles. 'We made the same boob at the garage in Inverness. That's really where we went wrong. The boy may not have been in the car when Cornelli took it back. The garage man didn't mention him. He said Cornelli brought it back. Cornelli rang up from Fort William. Cornelli every time. Come to think of it I don't remember him ever using the word *them*. It was always *he*. *He* did this. *He* did that. *He* walked away into the town. That should have been enough to tell us Cornelli was alone. Had the boy been there he would have said *they*. It would have been so easy for me to say, was the boy with him? Why did no one think of that? It's time I had my head examined.' In his irritation Biggles paced up and down the room.

'We all make mistakes,' said Gaskin, imperturbably.

Biggles told him of all that had happened in Scotland, including the arrival of the Viper on the scene and the affair of the stolen jeep.

'I'd better find out if the police up there have found it, and if so, where,' said Gaskin. 'But now I must get on. I've a lot on my own plate. Let me know if I can help. One of my men is tailing Cornelli. I'll let you know what he does. So long.' The Inspector departed.

Biggles stopped pacing the room and looked hard at Eddie. 'You realize what this means?'

'Sure. The boy's still in Scotland some place.'

'Yes. He probably still is in Scotland, although even that isn't certain. Cornelli could have put him on a train for somewhere. But it isn't that that worries me.'

'What's on your mind?'

‘The boy may be dead.’

The others stared. It was clear that this possibility hadn’t struck them.

‘Cornelli knows the Viper is hot on his track,’ resumed Biggles. ‘That could make a lot of difference to his behaviour. He’ll now be thinking of his own skin. He might well have decided there was no sense in cluttering himself up with the lad any longer. He’d be in the way.’

Eddie chewed on the cigar he had lighted. ‘You could be right. But that kid was worth a lot of money — alive.’

‘Cornelli’s life would be worth more to him than dollars. Money’s no use if you’re dead. He hasn’t behaved as if he was short of cash. The Viper could have been telling the truth when he said he’d skipped with ten thousand dollars. There was no need for him to lie about that. He gave us the information voluntarily. We didn’t ask for it.’

‘So what do we do — go back to Scotland?’ asked Eddie.

‘I think the first thing to do is ring up that garage at Inverness and ask the man if the boy was with Cornelli when he brought the car back. If he wasn’t the chances are he’s still somewhere in the Highlands, alive or dead. He wouldn’t go with Cornelli to the aerodrome, so we needn’t waste time checking that.’

‘We know where Cornelli is. Why not go to the Grosvenor and ask him to his face what he’s done with the lad?’ suggested Ginger.

‘Do you imagine for a moment he’d tell us? Not on your life. He’d laugh at us.’

‘Couldn’t you have him picked up on some charge? Using a false passport, for instance?’ asked Eddie.

‘It might be done, but what good would that do? Cornelli would be all the more certain to keep his trap shut for fear of a charge of abduction.’

‘Alive or dead he knows where the boy is.’

‘Of course he does, but he’s not going to tell us. His one concern now is to keep clear of the Viper.’

‘Yes, where are those two guys?’

‘I wonder if the police have found that jeep?’ put in Bertie. ‘The Viper and his pal could be popped inside for pinching it.’

‘That wouldn’t help us to find the boy. Just a minute. Let me think. Ginger, you might ring up that garage in Inverness to find out if young Carlo was with Cornelli when he brought back the car. While you’re at it you can ask the man if Cornelli had any luggage with him.’

Biggles returned to his desk, lit a cigarette, and fell silent, with his chin in his hands.

CHAPTER 10



CHAPTER 10

FRESH PLANS

BIGGLES said no more until Ginger, having spoken to the garage at Inverness, informed him: 'No. The boy wasn't there. Cornelli was alone, and as far as the man can remember he had no luggage.'

'We could have saved ourselves a lot of trouble if only we'd had the sense to ask those questions while we were there,' replied Biggles, dolorously.

'Now we're certain the boy is in the country don't you think the time has come to start a general hue and cry?' questioned Eddie. 'Everyone, not only the police but hotel keepers and the public, would be on the lookout for the boy.'

'I've considered that, but to me it sounds much too dangerous. If the wretched boy isn't already dead that would be the quickest way to get him murdered. Cornelli wouldn't risk the boy talking. Moreover, unless the body could be produced you couldn't charge Cornelli with murder. The law says, produce the body. No. I think it would be easier to find the boy alive than start searching the moors, rivers and forests, of Scotland, for his dead body.'

'Well, what have you worked out?'

'I have a feeling that Cornelli, apart from trying to shake off the Viper, had a reason for coming to London. He's up to something. I see it like this. If his only reason for coming here was to give the Viper the slip why did he leave the boy behind? He might as well have brought him with him. No. For some

reason he didn't want the boy around.'

'Can you think of a reason?'

'I can think of two or three, but the one that comes first to my mind is this, and it would apply whether the boy is alive or dead. On mature consideration I doubt if he is dead — yet. Remember, he's worth his weight in gold, and crooks like Cornelli don't throw money away, no matter how much they have in their pockets. The arrival of the Viper on the scene has made Cornelli change his plans. I don't think there can be much doubt about that. Suppose — I say suppose — he decided that he didn't want Carlo tagged on to him any longer, since he was bound to get in the way with his demands for fishing and flying. Suppose — again I say suppose — he decided to fall back on the ransom racket as the easiest and most profitable way of getting rid of him. In that case the first thing he'd do would be to make contact with the boy's father.'

'Well?'

'He'd be up against the difficulty that always confronts the kidnapper — how to get the ransom money without stepping into a trap. That difficulty would not be so great here as it would have been in the States. He could get in touch with the boy's father, by telephone, cable or letter, asking him to meet him here to discuss terms, saying nothing to the police and bringing the ransom money with him. If he did that, what would the old man do?'

'He'd come. He'd do anything on earth to get his only son back,' declared Eddie, without hesitation. 'When I saw him he was heart-broken.'

'You don't think he'd say anything to the police?'

'He would not. He wouldn't risk having the boy murdered by trying a double-cross. As you know, that has happened in the States more than once. With us kidnapping calls for the death penalty, so the kidnapper has nothing to lose by killing his victim.'

'Very well. Now you see the lines on which I'm thinking. If Cornelli was arranging for the old man to meet him somewhere, here in London for instance, he wouldn't want Carlo with him, would he?'

'No. The old man would simply call the police and that would be that.'

'Exactly. Carlo would be a hostage, kept at a safe distance. Cornelli could then say to the old man, your son is safe and well. Give me the money and I'll tell you where he is.'

'Sure. The old man would pay without any arguments.'

'And Cornelli, with his pockets bulging with money, could show the Viper a clean pair of heels — perhaps retire to Italy and live comfortably for the rest of his life on his ill-gotten gains. He would have had the satisfaction of having given the old man a fright and of relieving him of some of his wealth.'

'Cornelli might still kill the boy even though he got the money.'

Biggles made a gesture of helplessness. 'That's a risk that's always on the boards. It could happen at any time.'

'He can't have got the boy locked up,' put in Ginger.

‘Of course not. There would be no need for that. If he took Carlo to a fishing hotel and said, “I have to go away for a few days on business; you stay here and go on fishing till I come back,” the chances are the boy would stay — still with no suspicion of what was really happening.’

‘Sure,’ agreed Eddie. ‘I think you’ve got something there. He’s got the boy parked in some lonely place where he can always get at him if he wants to.’

Biggles shrugged. ‘It’s just an idea. I’m trying to think of a reason why Cornelli should come south without him — always assuming he hasn’t already murdered him and put the body where it’s not likely to be found. There are plenty of such places in Scotland. But as I say, I doubt if he’d do that while there was a chance of making money out of him.’

‘You could be right, at that.’

‘Whatever Cornelli’s game is here, sooner or later, if the boy’s still alive, he’ll go back to him; but that may not be for some time. He wouldn’t just abandon him. Having been to so much trouble to get hold of him and bring him here I can’t imagine him doing that.’

‘I guess you’re right.’

‘A pointer that Cornelli intends rejoining the lad is the fact that he had no luggage when he took the car back to the garage at Inverness. Had he intended leaving Scotland for ever he’d have had his kit with him. He left it somewhere. Where? A reasonable answer to that would be, where he left the boy. If the boy saw him leaving with all his luggage he would naturally wonder what was going on. Anyway, that supports my contention that he intends to go back to Scotland. According to Gaskin, Cornelli is now at the Grosvenor; but that’s beside the point. Without the boy he’s no use to us. The pressing question is, where has he left him?’

‘The answer to that might raise another question,’ put in Ginger. ‘Where did he go when we lost him on the road to Invergarry? He must have spent the night somewhere. How far did he go before he stopped?’

‘He rang up the garage from Fort William, but that doesn’t mean he spent the night there. I’d say not. All we can say with reasonable assurance is that it was within a hundred miles of Inverness. Where he stayed that night is probably where he’s left the boy.’

‘A radius of a hundred miles embraces a lot of ground, old boy,’ remarked Bertie, dubiously.

‘Not so much if we weed out the non-fishing places. Cornelli would have to leave the boy with something to do. He’d soon get bored with doing nothing. What more likely place than where fishing is available?’

Everyone agreed.

‘Following your argument, if we watched Cornelli sooner or later he’d lead us to the boy,’ offered Ginger.

‘That might be a slow business. Moreover, although Gaskin is having him shadowed we might lose him. As a professional crook who must often have been on the run, if he became suspicious that he was being watched he’d find

a way to shake the watcher off his trail. Knowing the Viper is looking for him he may not stay long in any one place.'

'Well, what do you suggest we do?' queried Eddie. 'You know the ropes over this side so I'll leave it to you.'

At this juncture the intercom, telephone buzzed. Biggles picked up the receiver, listened for a minute and replaced it.

'That was Gaskin,' he informed the others. 'An item of news. Gaskin has been on the phone to the Inverness police. Nothing has been seen of the Viper or his pal, but the jeep they pinched has been found. I won't ask you to guess where. Inverness — of all places. It was found abandoned in Union Street. That's about the last place I'd have looked for it. I can tell you something else. That black saloon car they were using had also been pinched.'

'Suffering snakes!' exclaimed Eddie. 'They've got a nerve.'

'The Viper had a nerve to go back to Inverness,' said Biggles. 'But there, in this business nobody is doing what might be expected. It's the unexpected every time. The Viper must have grabbed that jeep and did what we did; made for Inverness. As he had stolen the saloon he must have been glad to get rid of it. The fact that he returned to Inverness raises another question. Two, in fact. We thought we'd left him far behind standing on that lonely road, whereas he may have caught up with us and watched what we did in Inverness. That would depend on how long it was between the time we left him and the time the jeep came back.'

'What's the other question?'

'The Viper must have had a good look at that blue Morris when it was standing on the road beside Loch Ness. I mean, before he came down and joined us at the waterside to wait for Cornelli. He saw Cornelli and must have realized the Morris was his. He would naturally take its number. Of course, he no more knew where it went, after he ran out of petrol, than we did. He did exactly what we did. He gambled that it had gone back to Inverness. We may be sure he looked for it, and if he did he would in all probability have seen it standing outside the garage — again, just as we did.'

'Well?'

'What would he do? Not seeing Cornelli there he'd ask the garage man about it. If he did that he might have learned more than we did.'

'How?'

'The first thing he'd learn was that Cornelli had been there and resold the car. If he had the common sense to ask if the boy was with Cornelli, and learned that he was not, he'd realize that Carlo had been put off and was still somewhere in the Highlands. If he then made inquiries at the most probable ways out of Inverness he'd learn that Cornelli had taken the London plane south — alone. I know there are a lot of "ifs" and "buts" about this, yet I see no reason why the Viper shouldn't follow the same line as we did, armed with the extra knowledge that Cornelli was travelling alone. If he went to the aerodrome he'd learn that we'd gone south, too. He knew we had a plane

there because I told him so.'

Eddie drew a deep breath. 'Where does all this get us?'

'Your guess is as good as mine. Let's see what alternatives we have.

Firstly, we can stay here, with Gaskin watching Cornelli to tip us off if he makes a move. Secondly, we can go back to Scotland and try to find the boy. He'll be at a fishing hotel somewhere. The Viper may still be there or he may have come south. We don't know and it might be either.'

Ginger stepped in. 'Tearing round the Highlands calling at every fishing pub would be a long job. You said yourself—'

'I know. But I wasn't thinking of tearing round. If we went back, with Inverness as a centre we could telephone every hotel within reasonable distance and ask if there was a boy named Cornelli staying there. That would still be a tiresome job, but it would be quicker than visiting the hotels.'

'He might be using another name.'

'That's a risk we'd have to take. We could describe Carlo. Word of any boy of his age, fishing alone, would be worth investigating.'

'You feel like trying that?' questioned Eddie.

'Well, we shan't find the boy sitting here. We might as well try something, whatever the odds may be against us finding him. I think perhaps the best plan would be for us to split up and so work from both ends. Eddie and I could fly back to Inverness and see what we can make of it there. You, Bertie, and Ginger, can stay here, keeping in close touch with Gaskin. Should anything happen, ring us at the Station Hotel. We would at least be on the spot should anything arise at that end.'

Eddie nodded. 'I think you've got it. I can't think of anything better. This is the queerest sort of kidnapping case I've ever run into — looking for a boy who doesn't even know he's been kidnapped.'

Biggles glanced at the clock. 'It's too late to do anything today. We'll get cracking first thing tomorrow morning.'

'Mind if I ring up my chief in New York to tell him what's going on?' asked Eddie. 'He may think I'm taking a holiday.'

'Go ahead.'

Having got through Eddie had a fairly long conversation, at the end of which he uttered an exclamation of surprise, which naturally aroused the curiosity of those who were in the room.

'Well, what's the news?' asked Biggles, as Eddie hung up.

'It looks as if you were right on the beam in your reckoning as to why Cornelli had come to London. Guess what!'

'Don't waste time.'

'Rosario Salvatore, Carlo's father, is leaving for London by air. As far as I know he's never been to England in his life. Why should he suddenly make up his mind to come now? I figure only one thing would cause him to leave the States at a time like this.'

'News of his son.'

‘Sure.’

‘Has he said that?’

‘Not likely. He doesn’t want to get the kid bumped off, which is the habit of kidnappers if the victim squeals to the police. No. The reason he’s given for coming over here is urgent business. That needn’t deceive us. He had to give a reason and I suppose the one he’s given is as good as any.’

‘If he’s coming over to see Cornelli, and that’s what it looks like, he must know where he is, or have some prearranged way of making contact with him. We know Cornelli, without the boy, is at the Grosvenor, so I don’t see how this development is going to help us. On the contrary, it may complicate matters. I shall have to let Gaskin know about this.’

‘You mean, you’ll go on with our plan?’

‘I see no reason to change it. If we can find the boy before the old man parts with the ransom money, and that’s what he intends to do, we may save him a million dollars. The question is, will Cornelli hand over the boy if the old man pays up? I wouldn’t care to bet on it. Cornelli must be as crooked as they come, so this may be another trick. The whole thing has a fishy smell. I’d say Cornelli’s idea is to get the cash and still keep the boy. Why not, since that would be another slap in the old man’s face. Incidentally, Salvatore can know nothing of the Viper taking a hand in the game; and we’d do no good by meeting him and telling him. That would only be likely to upset him more. So we might as well carry on. As I see it now, the important thing is to know if Cornelli leaves London — or the old man, after he gets here.’

Eddie nodded. ‘I wouldn’t put it past Cornelli to have some scheme for torturing the boy’s father, somehow or other, if he can get hold of him.’

Biggles agreed. ‘Okay, let’s quit guessing and get to work,’ he concluded.

CHAPTER 11

COMPLICATIONS

THE following morning, having flown to Dalcross in the Proctor, Biggles and Eddie were at the Station Hotel, Inverness, before eleven, and with their reference books handy prepared to set about their tedious task of ringing up all the fishing hotels in the area, starting with Inverness as a centre and working outwards. It was, they quickly discovered, an even more formidable undertaking than they had thought, the country being interlaced with small rivers and lochs of which they had never heard and most of them having hotels or inns on or near their banks. Still, as Biggles argued, and Eddie agreed, to visit them all within a period of weeks, if not months, would have been impossible. The telephone was the only way.

By tea time they had had no success, and, leaving Eddie to carry on, Biggles made a break by walking to the garage on the off-chance that the man there had seen the boy. He had not, so all Biggles could do was ask him, should he see Mr Cornelli or the boy, to ring him at his hotel. The one item of news that did emerge was disconcerting. The man mentioned casually that the Cornellis seemed to be in great demand, for two other men, Americans he thought from the way they spoke, had been to the garage asking questions about them and the blue Morris.

Biggles returned to Eddie, and the monotonous telephoning, always with 'no' for the answer, proceeded. Later in the evening Biggles himself had a call, from Ginger. He had nothing to report.

The next day it was the same. The list of hotels had been reduced, but there were still many more to be questioned. Again in the late evening Ginger came through on the phone. This time he had an item of news although it did not help them in their quest. Carlo's father, Rosario Salvatore, had arrived at London airport from America. He had engaged a private car which had taken him direct to the Barchester Hotel. He had not been out since. Ginger suggested he might call on him, but Biggles said no; it was too dangerous. One ill-advised move at that juncture might prove fatal for the boy. In any case, the only information Mr Salvatore might have was the name of the hotel where the kidnapper was staying, and where in all probability they were to meet; but as this was already known nothing was to be gained, even if Mr Salvatore was prepared to divulge the name of the hotel.

The third day started as before, and Biggles and Eddie had just resumed their weary task of telephoning when Biggles himself was called to the telephone by a page.

It was the garage man, and Biggles took a fresh interest in what was fast becoming a dull affair when the man told him he had rung to say he thought he had seen the boy Cornelli. Biggles simply said, 'Thank you. I'll come

straight round.' He hurried back to Eddie, told him the news, and together they walked briskly to the garage.

'This is better,' said Eddie, new hope in his voice. 'This might get us some place.' 'Let's hope so,' answered Biggles. 'This telephoning is sending me round the bend. The regular police are doing it all the time, of course, but it isn't my line of country.'

They found the garage man waiting and he told them what had happened.

'It was like this,' he began. 'I was giving the Morris a wash down when a car pulled up at the pumps for petrol. There was a gentleman in it, driving, with a boy beside him. The gentleman got out. The boy sat still. I'm almost certain it was the boy I'd seen with Mr Cornelli.'

'Was this car known to you?' asked Biggles.

'No. I'd never seen it before.'

'What make was it?'

'A Rolls.'

'A *Rolls*! You didn't know the man?'

'No. He was very well dressed in tweeds and spoke like an Englishman. He was here for the fishing.'

'How did you know that?'

'He had flies in his hat, both salmon and trout flies. Besides, when we were talking he mentioned he'd come into the town to buy some tackle.'

'He didn't happen to mention where he was going for the tackle?'

'No.'

'Where would be the most likely shop?'

'In Inglis Street. There are two shops there. One is the biggest in the north. It has everything for the sports.'

'Can you give me a rough description of this gentleman?'

'Surely. He was about fifty, I'd say, tall, and a bit on the thin side. He had a small fair moustache turned up at the ends. He wore a lovat green jacket and grey trousers.'

'Did you take the number of the car?'

'No. I didn't notice it. Had no reason to.'

'Of course not. Thanks very much. We'll try the tackle shops. One of them may know him. Sorry to give you so much trouble.'

'It's nae bother.'

Biggles and Eddie walked away.

'What do you make of this?' questioned Eddie. 'Who's this new guy taking a hand? With a Rolls Royce, at that. Must have plenty of dough.'

'I don't think he's taking a hand in anything. I'd say he's somebody Carlo has got to know since he was left here on his own. Probably another keen fisher staying at the same hotel. Brought Carlo in for a run, or maybe, like himself, to get some new tackle. Carlo, at his age, couldn't have a car of his own.'

They had no difficulty in finding Inglis Street, where they went first to the

big sporting stores of which the garage man had spoken.

Biggles did not have to go into any great detail in his description of the man in whom he was now interested.

‘You must mean Major Grey,’ he was told, frankly. ‘Yes, we know him well. He’s an old customer of ours. Comes up every year for the fishing and the grouse shooting. He looked in this morning for some fine gut casts for sea-trout.’

‘He had a boy with him I believe?’

‘Yes. The boy bought some casts, too, and one or two flies.’

‘Do you know where Major Grey is staying?’

‘No, he didn’t say.’

‘Do you happen to know which river he’s fishing?’

‘I can’t remember him actually saying so, but I believe it’s the Spey.’

‘You’ve no idea which part of the Spey?’

‘None at all. I know he likes the Spey, but now so few beats are available he has to take a fishing where he can get it. Last season I remember he was on the Findhorn, which isn’t far from here, and didn’t have much luck, so he told me.’

‘When you speak of taking a fishing you mean he takes some private water, as opposed to hotel or free water?’

‘Yes. I know he’s always had his own beat. I imagine he has done that this season, but he didn’t mention where he was.’

‘In any case he’d stay at a hotel.’

‘Probably, but not necessarily. He may be staying at a private house. Many people who live in big houses now take paying guests for the fishing.’

‘Thank you. I’m much obliged to you.’

Biggles and Eddie went on their way, heading back towards the hotel.

‘Well, we’ve learned a little, but I don’t see that it helps us much,’ said Biggles. ‘Wherever this Major chap is staying Carlo is in the same place — or at least fishing the same water. He gave the boy a lift in this morning and by now is probably on his way home. That’s all there was to it. Our only clue, and it’s a slender one, is the River Spey. We’d better concentrate on it.’

‘If he’s staying at a private house we haven’t a hope of finding him,’ returned Eddie, dejectedly.

He thought still less of their chance when, back at the hotel, they learned from their map that the Spey, from its source near Loch Spey, wanders for a hundred miles before emptying itself into the North Sea; and that at intervals for its entire length there were towns, villages and hotels.

‘Well, let’s get down to it,’ said Biggles, doggedly. ‘At which end do we start, the source or the estuary?’

‘Does it make any difference?’

‘None that I can see.’

‘Okay. Then let’s start at the big end and work back up the river.’

They went to work, starting at the Spey Bay Hotel at the mouth of the

river, using the telephone in Biggles's bedroom.

They had been at it for some time, to no purpose, when, following a knock on the door, it was opened by one of the staff and in walked Ginger and Bertie.

In his astonishment Biggles nearly went over backwards in his chair. 'What the deuce are you doing here?' he cried, as he recovered.

'Things have been happening. We've news—'

'Why not phone?'

'We tried that and found we were wasting our time. Either you were out, or when you were in your number was engaged.'

'That's right. We've been out.'

'The news is so urgent and complicated that I decided it would be better to run up. We left Algy still trying to get you.'

'He wouldn't have a hope. Since we came in we've never been off the phone. How did you get here?'

'We flew up in the Auster. Left it at Dalcross. I'd have called you from the aerodrome, but there was a taxi there just going back to Inverness so we grabbed it to save time waiting for another.'

'I see. Well, what's this big news? Let's have it.'

'Fasten your safety belt, you're in for some bumps,' advised Ginger, grimly. 'We've lost Cornelli.'

Biggles groaned softly.

'And that isn't all,' went on Ginger. 'There's worse to come. The Viper and his pal were responsible. I'll tell you exactly what happened as far as we — that is, Gaskin and ourselves — have been able to work it out. What sent the balloon up was the Viper going to Mr Salvatore's hotel and gate-crashing in on him in his room.'

Biggles stared, frowning. 'But how could the Viper have known the old man was at the Barchester?' he cried, his voice rising in his astonishment.

'That's something we don't know for certain. Gaskin thinks someone in the States may have phoned or cabled the Viper and tipped him off that Salvatore was on his way over. There's also a chance the Viper may have read about it in a newspaper.'

'Newspaper! What newspaper?'

'The *New York Times*. There's a paragraph in it although I haven't seen it myself. The paper can be bought over here.'

Biggles looked at Eddie in horror. 'Would anyone be such an imbecile as to publish Salvatore's movements in a newspaper?'

'Certainly — if a reporter got hold of it, and they manage to get hold of most things. After all, this kidnapping case is hot news in America and any scrap of information would be on the front page.'

Biggles shook his head sadly.

Ginger continued: 'Never mind how the Viper found out that Salvatore was on his way here; we know for a fact he must have done, and he did what

you'd expect him to do. He must have met the New York plane in and shadowed the old man to his hotel. I've seen Mr Salvatore myself, and as he didn't tell anyone where he was going to stay there's no other explanation.'

'Go on. So the Viper went to the hotel. What did he want with the old man?'

'He said he thought he could get his son back for him, but the old man didn't fall for that. He said he could get the boy back without any help. Naturally, the Viper took that to mean the old man was in touch with Cornelli and asked him where Cornelli was staying.'

'The old man wouldn't tell him, of course.'

'He had to. At first he refused, but the Viper pulled a gun and swore he'd shoot if he didn't open up. Mr Salvatore told me this himself. The poor old man's all to pieces with shock.'

'So he told the Viper what he wanted to know.'

'He had to.'

'What did he say?'

'He said he had an appointment that evening with Cornelli at the Grosvenor. That explains how the Viper knew Cornelli was at the Grosvenor. Apparently he'd guessed, as you did, why Salvatore had come over.'

'Go on. What happened next?'

'The Viper and his pal went straight to the Grosvenor, and as Bertie and I have been there we know exactly what happened. They went to the inquiry bureau where the keys of the rooms are kept and asked the man in charge for the number of Cornelli's room. The man said it was against the rules to do that, but he offered to send a message. He knew Cornelli was in because his key wasn't on the rack. Cornelli always left it there when he went out.'

'Yes, I understand that. Carry on.'

'Now to make this clear, in case you don't know, you must realize that the key racks are right beside the lift, with the main staircase just on the other side. This means that the man at the desk can see both the lift and the staircase. Cornelli's room was on the third floor. Invariably he used the lift. The man at the desk wouldn't allow the Viper to go up alone because he wasn't resident in the hotel.'

'Quite right. That's usual.'

'Well, as I say, he knew Cornelli was in, so after some argument he called for a page and told him to take the two gentlemen up to Cornelli's room. But he didn't let it go at that. As soon as the page was in the lift with the two men he rang Cornelli and told him that two friends of his were on their way up to see him. They hadn't given their names.'

'This conversation between the desk and Cornelli took place while the Viper was on his way up?'

'Yes.'

'Which means the Viper didn't hear it?'

'Exactly. He didn't know the man at the desk was ringing Cornelli to

advise him to expect visitors.'

'I'm with you. I can guess what's coming.'

'The page knocked on Cornelli's door. There was no answer. He knocked several times, but not getting an answer came to the natural conclusion that Cornelli was out. That's what he told the Viper.'

'Was that correct?'

'Too true it was. In the few minutes the Viper was getting there Cornelli had bolted.'

'How can you be sure of that?'

'Because when the page went back to the desk and reported, the man in charge was so puzzled, having spoken to Cornelli only a moment before, that he went up and opened the door with his master-key. The room was empty. And we can guess why. Cornelli was taking no chances. He must have guessed it was the Viper, or the police, and he didn't want to see either. He probably didn't want to see anyone.'

'How did Cornelli get out?'

'The man at the desk says he didn't use the lift or the stairs or he must have seen him. Gaskin thinks he must have gone down an emergency fire exit. There's at least one on every floor. That's all. Gaskin's man was of course watching the main exit so he didn't see him go. So we've lost him.'

Biggles sat back. 'This rascal Cornelli has the luck of the devil, on top of which he's as slippery as an eel. What's Gaskin doing about this?'

'He says there isn't much he can do except watch all ports in case Cornelli tries to leave the country. Actually, he believes he's more likely to head back for Scotland, to the place where he left the boy. He's put a good man on to watch Euston station in case he returns north by train. He can't arrest him even if he sees him because he's no charge against him.'

'What about the hotel?'

'He's having the Grosvenor watched on the off-chance of Cornelli going back, although he thinks that's unlikely.'

'So do I. What about the Viper and his pal?'

'Nothing has been seen of 'em since they walked out of the hotel. Mr Salvatore has been given police protection although he doesn't know it. Incoming phone calls are also being checked at the Barchester in case Cornelli tries to make contact with the old man to fix another appointment. The appointment at the Grosvenor is off, of course, after what's happened. That's about all.' Ginger sat down. 'We've been busy, I can tell you.'

'So the question is now, where has Cornelli gone?' mused Biggles.

'And what does he aim to do next?' added Eddie.

Biggles took a cigarette from his case. 'What a mess,' he muttered. 'We seem to be getting nowhere — fast.'

'We could do with something to eat,' said Ginger. 'We've been on the hop since early this morning.'

'Okay,' answered Biggles. 'Let's eat, and I'll tell you how far we've got at

this end.'

'Do you want us to go back to London?'

'Please yourself. There's nothing you can do there now you've lost Cornelli. Not that there's anything you can do here unless we pick up the trail.'

'We might as well stay for a bit in case anything turns up,' decided Ginger.

CHAPTER 12

ANOTHER DISAPPOINTMENT

THEY had a meal in the dining-room, talking over the new turn in their quest, and continued the discussion afterwards in Biggles's room without reaching any new conclusions. Ginger and Bertie were told of Carlo's visit to Inverness in the Rolls belonging to Major Grey.

With nothing more to say Eddie continued the telephone inquiries at the Speyside hotels, and having got up the river as far as Grantown-on-Spey, without success, left the instrument saying he was so sick of getting 'no' for an answer he'd lay off until the morning.

Hardly had he done this than the phone bell rang with an incoming call.

'Now what?' muttered Biggles, reaching for the receiver. 'I suppose it's for me.' The others saw him stiffen, and he whispered: 'It's Gaskin.'

He listened for some time, seldom speaking; so long, in fact, that it became evident that more news was coming through. When at last he hung up there was a gleam in his eyes. 'I think we've got him at last,' he announced.

'Got who?'

'Cornelli. Who else?'

'Gaskin seemed to have a lot to say,' prompted Ginger.

'Plenty. Cornelli's on the night express from Euston to Inverness.'

'You don't say!' exclaimed Eddie.

'I do say, and there's no possible doubt about it. Gaskin's sleuth, the one who'd been watching the Grosvenor and knows Cornelli by sight, was switched to watch the trains going to Scotland. He saw Cornelli board the train and he hadn't come out when it left. So he's on the way back to the boy — at least, that's what it looks like. Unfortunately that's not all. The Viper and his pal are on the same train.'

'Great grief!' cried Eddie. 'If that's the case Cornelli will be lucky to reach Inverness alive.'

'You may be wrong there.'

'How so? The Viper has only to walk along the corridor looking into every compartment and it'll be curtains for Cornelli.'

'Hold your horses until I've finished,' requested Biggles. 'It's by no means certain the Viper knows Cornelli is on the train. Nor, for that matter, may Cornelli know the Viper's travelling north with him. I'll tell you what happened, as Gaskin has just given it to me, and you'll understand why it took him some time. Cornelli arrived at Euston two hours before the train was due to leave. Closely watched by Gaskin's man — who of course he didn't know — he bought a first-class ticket to Inverness. He then went to the sleeping car booking office where it seems he had a slice of luck. There wasn't a sleeper left. They were all booked. He must have been an optimist if he thought he

could get one at a moment's notice at this time of the year.'

'Then where does the luck come in?'

'With Gaskin's man watching all this the clerk told Cornelli that if he cared to wait there was just a chance there might be a cancellation. There was, so he got a sleeper after all. After that he went and sat in a corner of the tea room; but when the express was shunted in, about half an hour before it was due out, he was already on the platform. He went straight to the sleeping cars, saw the attendant and took up his reservation. Up to the time the train steamed out he hadn't even put his head outside. He was taking no chances. Anyhow, as he didn't leave the train he must be on it.'

'But what about the other two?' queried Eddie. 'They must have been tailing Cornelli.'

'That doesn't follow. From what Gaskin tells me it looks more as if they, too, had decided to go back to Scotland, anyway. All I can tell you is this. Gaskin's man, never having seen the Viper although he'd been given a description of him, couldn't swear that it was him and his pal. But he's pretty sure of it. Remember, he was standing on the platform. At the last minute before the barrier was closed they came rushing through and caught the train by the skin of their teeth. With the whistle blowing all they could do was jump in one of the rear coaches. It's most unlikely they could have got sleepers, so unless they knew Cornelli was on the train there wouldn't be much chance of them seeing him. The sleepers are always up in front. They were well behind.'

'Then the show-down looks like coming when the train rolls into Inverness,' opined Ginger. 'There's every chance they'll see each other then.'

'We shall be there, too,' said Biggles, smiling faintly. 'As I say, Cornelli can have only one reason for coming north and that's to rejoin Carlo. All we have to do is follow him and he'll take us to the hotel where the boy is staying. Then we pounce. We'll have a car outside, so no matter where Cornelli goes or how he travels we shall be with him.'

Eddie grinned. 'It sounds almost too good to be true.'

Biggles shrugged a shoulder. 'It's hard to see how anything can go wrong. Our one difficulty might be to prevent the Viper barging in on us again. If he sees Cornelli get off the train — well, anything could happen. But we'll deal with that should it arise. There's no need for us to do any more telephoning. In fact, there's no need for us to do anything except be at the station tomorrow morning when the London train is due in. We'll check the time. In fact, we'll get a time-table, then there can be no mistake about it. Let's leave it at that. You please yourselves what you do, but I'm for bed.'

The next morning, after a good night's sleep, found them early on the move, getting organized to meet the seven-ten train out of Euston station, London, due in at Inverness, as they had confirmed, at a few minutes before nine - 8.54 a.m. to be precise. There was not much to be done. As they walked round to the garage to hire a self-drive car Biggles remarked: 'This fellow will soon begin to wonder what sort of a game we're playing — unless he's

already decided we're out of our minds.' However, whatever he may have thought the garage proprietor did not comment. He let them have the same car as before, the Humber, which was driven round to the station and parked in a convenient place. After that, all that was necessary was to put themselves in handy positions from which they would be able to watch the arrival of the train without being seen.

Said Ginger, as they waited: 'The Viper certainly has a nerve to come back to Inverness with the police after him for car stealing.'

Biggles answered: 'He may not know the police are looking for him. I mean, he may suppose the police haven't a description of him.'

'What about the forester who was knocked out and lost his jeep?'

'It was nearly dark at the time. The Viper may be gambling the man didn't get a really good look at him. Anyhow, he's obviously prepared to take a chance on that.'

'Why not tell the local police he's coming in on the London train?'

'I've considered that and decided it may complicate matters.'

'How?'

'The police would probably want us to go with them to the police station, for identification, when the charge is made. I think it's better to leave that for the moment. We can always call up the police if the Viper looks like getting in our way.'

Conversation lapsed and tension mounted as the time for the train's arrival drew near.

Dead on time, panting steam after its long run, the big engine ponderously drew its long line of coaches into the station. As soon as it had stopped the passengers began to alight. There were a good many. No one in Biggles's party spoke as they streamed off the platform, the porters busy with luggage. Some minutes passed. Cornelli did not appear. Nor did the Viper and his accomplice. The passengers were soon thinning out, but still there was no sign of them.

In a quarter of an hour it was all over. The train stood with its doors gaping. The engine driver and his mate climbed down. The guard walked along carrying his little black bag.

'So they weren't on the train after all,' said Eddie, in a curious voice.

'They weren't on it when it arrived here, that's certain,' replied Biggles.

'I don't get it.'

'Neither do I. All I know is they must have been on the train when it left London or Gaskin wouldn't have said so.'

'Looks like they've tricked us again,' muttered Eddie, bitterly.

Biggles agreed. 'Cornelli's ticket to Inverness must have been another ruse to cover his tracks.'

'What do you reckon has happened?'

'That's fairly simple to answer. Cornelli must have got off at one of the intermediate stations.'

‘What about the other two?’

‘If they saw him get off they’d get off too, and follow him.’

‘Unless they bumped him off on the way.’

‘I doubt if that could happen.’

‘Why not? If they walked the length of the train they might have spotted him.’

‘I don’t think so. Cornelli had a sleeper. Being the sort of man he is he would probably have locked himself in. In fact, most people travelling in a sleeper put the catch on the door when they turn in for the night. I’d say Cornelli had no intention of coming to Inverness.’

‘Then why take a ticket for Inverness?’

‘What was in his mind when he did that I don’t know; but apparently he had a reason. After all, we have reason to suppose he left the boy fishing the Spey. That being so, why should he come here? Inverness is nowhere near the Spey. The train ran alongside the Spey some distance back, but as I remember the map the main line leaves the Spey at Aviemore Junction, which is thirty-odd miles from here. It’s the branch line that follows the Spey. I have a feeling we haven’t been very clever.’

‘What you mean is, Cornelli got off the train at this place Aviemore and took the branch line.’

‘Something like that. He could of course have got off at one of the small stations on the Spey before reaching Aviemore.’

‘But I thought this train was an express!’

‘So it is. But like many long distance expresses it stops to drop off passengers at small places near the end of its run. Let’s have a look at the time-table and see where it stops actually on the Spey. I know there are several little stations but I forget their names.’

As they walked back to the car Ginger said: ‘This might apply to Cornelli, but why should the Viper get off the train at a Speyside station? He wouldn’t be likely to know the boy was fishing the Spey.’

‘I think there’s only one answer to that. The Viper saw Cornelli get off the train, and if he hadn’t time to get off himself he’d certainly get out at the next station. That’s how I see it, to account for why none of ‘em were on the train when it got to Inverness. If I’m right, anything could have happened by now, so we’d better get cracking.’

In his seat in the car, Biggles, with the A.A. Guide on his knee, thumbed quickly through the time-table.

‘Here we are,’ he went on. ‘On the Spey, before we come to the Junction, there are several stations — Newtonmore, Kingussie, Kincraig.... I think the first thing to do is inquire at these stations for a man who got off with an Inverness ticket. There shouldn’t be much difficulty about that. I mean, there can’t be much traffic at these wayside stops, and the porter or stationmaster would remember anything unusual.’

‘Suppose Cornelli got off at Aviemore and took the branch line along the

Spey to Grantown and wherever else it goes?’

Biggles shrugged. ‘If our first inquiries fail we shall have to try that line, although don’t forget we’ve spoken to most of the hotels on the lower Spey on the telephone. We’ll start at Aviemore and work back up the river from there.’

‘We could ask for Major Grey,’ suggested Ginger. ‘Even if he isn’t known people will have noticed his Rolls. There can’t be many about. Carlo, not expecting Cornelli back so soon, may be fishing with him.’

‘That’s quite likely,’ opined Biggles. ‘What I’m most afraid of is, if the Viper finds Cornelli in some lonely spot, he may, under the threat of bumping him off, demand to be told where the boy is staying.’

‘He’d probably bump him off anyway,’ put in Eddie, sourly.

Biggles folded the map and put it with the time-table in the slot in the instrument panel. ‘We’ve wasted enough time guessing, let’s get on with it.’

‘You wouldn’t think, in a little country like this, anyone would be so hard to find,’ said Eddie, morosely, as the car moved off. ‘This sure is a crazy business.’

Biggles smiled. ‘Never mind. Let’s not get in a tizzy about it. At least we’re seeing some delightful scenery.’

‘I can see that at home,’ growled Eddie. ‘The scenery I want to see is Carlo Salvatore. You can have the mountains, brother.’

The car went on through the outskirts of the town and was soon speeding across the open countryside.

CHAPTER 13



CHAPTER 13

A WARM SCENT AT LAST

‘FOR a start,’ said Biggles, as they neared Aviemore, ‘we’ll try the railway stations. If we have no luck with them we’ll see if the hotels can tell us anything.’

‘There’s at least one fair-sized hotel at all these places, sometimes two or three,’ informed Ginger, who was checking with that invaluable handbook for tourists, the Automobile Association Guide.

The first stop was Aviemore, where it may as well be said at once they drew blank, learning nothing either at the station or at the two hotels. There were some houses where paying guests were taken, but these they did not bother about, for, as Biggles said, it seemed unlikely that Cornelli would stay at such an establishment, and to call at all of them would occupy too much time. What they did discover was, the Rolls was less likely to help them than they had reason to suppose, for salmon fishing on the best rivers, of which the Spey is one, is an expensive pastime, and it was not uncommon for a wealthy visitor from the south to arrive in a Rolls Royce.

They had no better luck at the next halt, Kinraig, so, with the river flowing through the strath on their left they pushed on to Kingussie. More than once they saw people fishing, but none looked like those who were the object of their quest. However, at Kingussie station they struck the trail, although it did not get them far. A porter who had collected the tickets from the passengers

who had got off the London train remembered two who answered to the description of the Viper and his companion. Not only did he recall that their tickets were for Inverness, but they had asked him at what time there would be a train going back to Newtonmore, which had struck him as somewhat odd since the train from which they had alighted had just come through that station, and had stopped there. On being told there would not be a train for some time they had asked about the possibilities of hiring a car. What happened to them after that the porter did not know. They had put their bags in the left-luggage office and then left the station.

‘I can see what happened,’ said Biggles, as they went on to the big hotel, the Duke of Gordon. ‘It was what I said I thought might happen. Looking out of the window as the train steamed out of the station the Viper saw Cornelli standing on the platform. As it was then too late for him to get out of the train all he could do was drop off at the next station, Kingussie, and go back.’

They learned nothing at the hotel. One of the staff, on duty outside, said he had two or three times seen a Rolls go through, but as he knew nothing about it that did not help them.

They went on to Newtonmore and there, at the station, Biggles’s appraisal of the situation was more or less confirmed. The porter on duty distinctly remembered a man answering to Cornelli’s description getting off. He had given up his ticket, which was for Inverness.

‘You’re the second lot of people I’ve had here asking questions about that gentleman,’ said the porter, who may have been wondering what all this was about.

Biggles described Carlo Salvatore. The porter had a vague idea that he had seen such a boy going fishing, but he knew no more.

And Biggles led the way to the Balavil Arms, the chief hotel, he remarked: ‘From now on we’d better go warily. Cornelli can’t be far away; neither can the Viper, who’s following the same trail as we are.’

At the door of the hotel they encountered a man doing some cleaning, apparently one of the staff. He knew of no one named Cornelli, but when Biggles mentioned a Rolls Royce he said at once: ‘You must mean Major Grey.’

‘That’s right,’ returned Biggles quickly. ‘Is he staying here?’

The man shook his head. ‘Na. Not this time. He has stayed with us once or twice, that’s how I know him. But he isn’t with us this year.’

‘Do you happen to know where he is staying?’

‘Na. Canna’ be far away because I’ve seen his car about.’

‘Do you know where he’s fishing — what beat he’s on?’

‘Na.’ The man scratched his head. ‘I don’t think it can be the Spey or I’d have known. I know who’s on most of the beats because mostly it’s the same party year after year. I remember the Major saying to me last year he thought of going somewhere else. The water was awa’ to nothing and he couldna touch a fush.’

'You don't remember him saying where he thought of going?'

'Na.'

Biggles described Carlo.

'Aye, I've seen the laddie aboot.'

'Was this him?' Biggles showed Carlo's photograph.

'Aye, that's the laddie, richt enough,' returned the man without hesitation.

'I saw him once with Major Grey.'

'He isn't staying here, at the hotel?'

'Na. But he might be at one of the others.' The man pointed at a figure striding up the road. 'Yon's the gentleman you want to ask. He knows where everyone's fishing.'

'Who is he?'

'Mr Grant.'

'How does he know?'

'He's the water bailiff.'

'Thanks,' acknowledged Biggles. 'I'll speak to him. He may be able to help us.'

Biggles intercepted the river official. 'Good morning, Mr Grant. May I have a word with you?'

'Surely,' was the courteous reply.

'Do you know a boy named Cornelli? I believe he's fishing somewhere in the neighbourhood.'

'I canna say I know the name.'

'Do you know Major Grey?'

'Aye. I ken him fine. I've known him for many a year. A very nice gentleman. He casts a grand fly.'

'Do you know what part of the Spey he's fishing?'

'He's no fishing the Spey.'

'But he's somewhere near.'

'Aye. He's on the Tromie.'

'What's the Tromie — a loch?'

'No — no. She's a tributary of Spey.'

'Where is it, exactly?'

'Not far away.' The bailiff pointed. 'She joins Spey yonder.'

'Is there a road?'

'I wouldna say a road. A track, you could call it, to Tromie Lodge. It's a private road, ye ken, to the Lodge.'

'Is this a fairly long river?'

'Aye. Fair. She rises in Loch Seilich, way back in yon hills, the Cairngorms.'

'There would be a chance of finding Major Grey on the river?'

'Aye, I'd think that. He'll be on the water, no doubt. It's a grand day for fishing. If he isn't on the river he'll be at the Lodge.'

'Do you mean he's staying at the Lodge?'

‘Aye, he’s taken it for the season, I hear.’

‘There would be no objection to me walking up the river bank?’

‘None at all. But ye canna fish, ye ken, without the Major’s permission. It’s private water.’

‘I understand that. As it happens I don’t want to fish. Where, on the river, do you think the Major would be most likely to fish?’

The bailiff pursed his lips and glanced at the sky. ‘After the fine spell of weather the river will be a wee bit thin, and clear, so you’ll be likely to find him trying the rough water below the lynn.’

Biggles smiled. ‘Forgive the ignorance of a stranger but what do you call the lynn?’

‘You’d call it a waterfall, I’m thinkin’.’

‘And how far up the river is that?’

‘Six or seven miles.’

Biggles grimaced. ‘As far as that. And how far to the loch?’

‘Twelve miles or a bit more.’

‘Do the salmon get above the lynn?’

‘Aye, they do that, up to the loch.’

‘Then the Major might be fishing the loch.’

‘Aye. There’s a boat kept there. But there won’t be many fish up as far as that yet. It’s full early. The fish go right up to spawn and they usually wait at the lynn for heavy water. The beasties canna’ climb over the rocks when they’re dry.’

‘I see. Well, thank you very much, Mr Grant, for being so helpful.’

‘Tis a pleasure. Good morning, gentlemen.’ The water bailiff strode on about his business of watching for poachers or illegal methods of killing fish.

Biggles turned, looking from Eddie to Bertie. ‘Where’s Ginger?’ he asked, seeing that he was not there.

Bertie answered. ‘He walked off suddenly about a minute ago.’

‘Where?’

‘Behind those old houses — down there.’ Bertie pointed. ‘He said he’d be back in a jiffy.’

Biggles frowned. ‘Why does he want to disappear at this moment?’ he muttered irritably. ‘It looks as if we’ve a long hike in front of us if we’re to walk the length of this river — what did he call it — the Tromie. If that’s where Carlo is fishing with Major Grey, as seems likely, it explains why no one has seen him on the Spey. And if Grey has invited Carlo to stay at his lodge with him we’ve been wasting our time chasing round all these hotels. What the devil is Ginger playing at? We can’t move off without him.’

Ginger was not playing. Anything but that. He had just had the shock of his life. What happened was this. Standing behind Biggles listening to the conversation with the water bailiff his eyes wandered idly over the scene just beyond. He was not looking at, or for, anything in particular. In fact, he was listening intently to the conversation, but rather than stare at the Scot who was

speaking he looked anywhere but at him. Far from there being anything unusual about this it is a common practice with people who prefer not to embarrass a stranger by looking him straight in the face unless one is actually speaking.

At first there was not a soul in sight, but after a while a man appeared, walking quickly as if on a definite errand, in a lane by some stone buildings. What these buildings were Ginger did not know. He had not the slightest interest in them. The man had appeared from somewhere behind them, perhaps forty or fifty yards away. Ginger merely noted the man casually as he looked towards them and then turned sharply back to where he had come from. But in that moment Ginger's interest had been aroused. The first thought that sprang into his mind was that he had seen the man before, somewhere. He couldn't recall where. Then, with a mild shock, it struck him that the man looked remarkably like the one they were looking for, Cornelli. In the ordinary way he would have passed this information on to Biggles immediately, but it so happened that he was at that precise moment speaking to the bailiff, and rather than break in he strode off to make sure he had not been mistaken. He had only caught a brief glimpse of the man, and that at some little distance away. It might, he thought, be as well to confirm his impression before sparking off an alarm that could hardly fail to arouse the bailiff's curiosity as to what they were doing. Saying quietly to Bertie, 'I'll be back in a jiffy,' he strode off, and a minute later reached the corner of the buildings behind which he had seen the man disappear. He took no precautions against being seen, seeing no reason to do so, but walked boldly and briskly in the hope of catching sight of the man before he disappeared altogether.

Without altering his pace he swung round the corner, instantly to be stopped with a jerk and a gasp as something hard was thrust into the pit of his stomach.

'Keepa walking,' said a thin, hard voice.

Ginger looked up into the dark, expressionless face of Cesare Paola, the gangster who now called himself Cornelli. Looking down he saw that the object that had been pushed into his stomach with unnecessary force was the muzzle of an automatic pistol.

'I said to keepa walking,' repeated Cornelli, softly, but with intense deliberation.

Ginger did not move. He looked at the face with its dead-pan expression and the smouldering eyes of a killer.

It is all very well to say what he should, or might have done, at that moment. In these days of armed robbery an increasing number of people have been faced with the same problem; to obey or to resist. The question that inevitably arises is, will he shoot or is he bluffing? Most people, wisely perhaps, do not put the matter to test. The problem arises even when the assailant is unknown, possibly masked. That did not apply here. Ginger knew

the man and his reputation. Cornelli did not carry a gun to support his courage or merely as a threat. He had killed men with that same gun, and would, Ginger did not doubt, do so again should it become necessary. That was his business.

What caused Ginger to hesitate was the fact that his friends were within call, a circumstance which, if he obeyed the order to walk, might not be repeated.

‘Walk,’ rasped Cornelli again, in a voice even more menacing than before.

Ginger shrugged, and deciding that here discretion might be the better part of valour, obeyed. Argument would obviously be futile, and in any case one can’t argue with empty hands when the other fellow holds a gun at a range of inches. He might get a chance to do something later. So he set off down a lane in the direction indicated, Cornelli so close beside him that anyone watching would not see the gun still pressed against his ribs.

Not that there was anyone in sight. All was still and quiet on a fine summer day. Birds sang. Bees hummed. Ginger and his unwelcome companion might have been two dear friends out for a stroll.

The way, with the houses now behind them, sloped gently downhill towards the river, glimpses of which could occasionally be seen through gaps in a long stand of old Scots pines that occupied the brae and filled the air with the fragrant tang of resin. Into these the lane ran on, fast dwindling to a track. There was no undergrowth except for some straggling bracken here and there, so no chance to make a break and hide.

‘In here,’ said Cornelli. ‘I guess this’ll do.’

He left the track and entered the pine wood.

Underfoot the ground lay deep in dead pine needles, spotted with humps of grey-green moss. On this carpet footsteps made no sound.

Deep in the wood Cornelli stopped and faced his prisoner. ‘Now, smart guy, talka quick and plenty,’ he ordered, coldly.

CHAPTER 14

GINGER ON A SPOT

GINGER looked at Cornelli uncomprehendingly. 'Talk?*' he echoed. 'What about?'

'Donta give me dat line, copper. I'm waitin', and I ain't got no time to waste.'

'Copper? What are you talking about?' Ginger tried the bluff although he knew it was a flimsy one. 'What gives you the idea I'm a copper?'

Cornelli leered. 'I can smell a copper a mile off. Why else you follow me around? Quit stalling and start talkin'.'

'What am I supposed to talk about?'

'De kid. Where is he?'

Ginger's lips parted in astonishment that was genuine. 'Are you asking *me*?'

'Sure I'm askin' you. I speeka da English plain, don' I?' In spite of his long residence in the United States Cornelli had not lost his native accent.

Ginger decided that to deny knowledge of the boy would be futile. Cornelli obviously knew who he was and what he was doing there. 'How should I know where the boy is?' he demanded, with asperity. 'If anyone should know where he is it's you.'

'So you play dumb, eh?' Cornelli made a threatening movement with his gun. 'Okay, copper. Have it your way.'

'Are you crazy? What makes you think I know where the boy is?' protested Ginger. 'You brought him here. We didn't.'

'Sure I brought him. Why you come here?'

'We were looking for the boy. I'm not denying that. But so far we haven't found him.'

'For what you want him?'

'To take him back to his father. What else?'

Cornelli's saturnine face creased in a cynical smile that sent a cold shiver down Ginger's spine. 'So dat's de lay. He donta go back. Not never. After all I do for dat kid he run away. Where you got him now?'

'You're out of your mind. We haven't got him. I've already told you we haven't been able to find him. If we'd found him do you suppose we'd still be here? We'd be on our way back to London.'

This argument seemed to carry some weight. 'You figger he's still here some place?'

'Of course we do, otherwise we wouldn't be here. Can't you understand that?'

'How come you tink he's around here some place?'

'Because you came here.'

‘How you know I come here?’

‘Because this is where you got off the London train.’

‘So you know dat. Smart. Sure, you’re smart.’

‘Naturally, we assumed it was somewhere near here that you’d left the boy when you went to London. You see, I’m being quite frank about it.’ Ginger was being frank because he could see no reason to be otherwise.

‘Sure I left de kid here, but he ain’t where I left him.’

‘For which reason you think we found him. Forget it. I only wish you were right.’

By this time Ginger had grasped the situation. Cornelli had lost the boy, and now, like they themselves, was looking for him. He could have laughed at the irony of it. Feeling there now seemed a chance of turning the position to his own advantage he went on: ‘Am I right in thinking that when you dashed off to London you left the boy here in lodgings?’

‘Sure.’

‘You told him to go on fishing?’

‘Sure.’

‘And when you came back today he’d disappeared?’

‘Sure. Dat’s right.’

‘So you jumped to the conclusion that we’d found him?’

‘Sure.’

‘Well, you’re wrong. It’s my guess he’s still fishing.’

‘Where?’

‘Why ask me? Didn’t he leave a message at his lodgings?’

‘No. He goes out and he donta come back.’

‘Maybe you came back before he expected you.’

‘So dat’s how you figger it.’

‘Meanwhile he found a place where the fish were more obliging.’

Cornelli did not answer. His quandary was plain to see.

‘You’ve only to wait at the place where you left him and sooner or later he’ll come back,’ suggested Ginger. ‘That is, unless he’s found a playmate who takes more interest in fishing than you do,’ he added, slyly.

Cornelli’s eyes narrowed. ‘Whata you mean by dat? What you know? Come clean.’

‘I’m saying what I think may have happened.’ Actually, Ginger was now fairly certain that this was what had in fact upset Cornelli’s apple-cart. Realizing he was getting on dangerous ground he went on quickly: ‘If you’re still hoping to find the boy you’ll have to be quick about it.’

‘So you still figger to find him — ha? You be wise and keep outa dis. I don’t stand for no monkey business from cops.’ Cornelli’s tone had become vicious.

‘I wasn’t thinking of myself,’ returned Ginger, evenly.

‘Who else you tink of?’

‘The Viper.’

‘What about him?’

‘He’s gunning for you. He says you double-crossed him. If it hadn’t been for us he’d have got you at the landing stage at Loch Ness.’

‘He donta find me.’

‘Don’t be too sure of that. He’s here, with his pal.’

‘Mack?’

‘I don’t know his name. Tall fellow. Looks a bit and talks a bit like a Scot.’

‘Sure. Dat’s Mack. Talks plenty about dis dump where he came from, fishing and all dat.’

‘Is that why you brought the boy here?’

‘Quit asking questions. You’re so wise, where’s de Viper now?’

‘I’ve told you. He’s here.’

Cornelli frowned. ‘You mean *right* here.’

‘That’s exactly what I mean. And he knows you’re here.’

‘How come he knows? You tell him, you—’

For an instant, from the expression on Cornelli’s face, Ginger thought he was going to shoot. ‘Don’t be dumb. Why should I tell him?’ he said quickly. ‘He followed you. He was on the same train as you when you left London. Didn’t you know that?’

Cornelli obviously did not know. For once his self-control slipped and he looked shaken.

Ginger, seeing that he had got in a blow followed it up, now speaking with more confidence. ‘We knew you were on that train because the police in London were tailing you. They rang us up at Inverness and told us. We met the train there. You weren’t on it. Neither were the Viper and Mack. We worked it out that you’d got off at one of the stations on the Spey and the Viper spotted you on the platform. We know he got out at the next station and came back. He can’t be far away, so if you’ve live ammunition in that gun you’d better save it for him. Now you know as much as I do.’

‘You sure about dis?’

‘Of course I’m sure.’

‘You ain’t kiddin’?’

Ginger made a gesture of impatience. ‘Do I sound as if I’m kidding?’

‘How you find out?’

‘By asking at all the stations along the line about people who got off with an Inverness ticket. That’s how we knew where you were. So we came along. Simple, wasn’t it?’

Cornelli bit his lip. ‘Smart,’ he said softly. ‘Sure. Real smart.’

Ginger saw no harm in telling Cornelli this because he couldn’t see how it would help him. Apart from that, the knowledge that the Viper was close on his trail would make things more difficult for him. To start looking for the boy, and that Ginger imagined had been Cornelli’s intention, would be a more dangerous operation than he had anticipated.

‘Now I’ve told you all I know do you mind if I go back to my friends?’

requested Ginger.

‘Not so fast,’ returned Cornelli coldly. ‘What gives you de idea youse goin’ back? Who’s dat guy you talk to uppa de road?’

‘He’s a man who lives here.’

‘What you talk about?’

‘We asked him if he’d seen a boy fishing anywhere.’

‘Did he see de kid some place?’

‘No. All he could say was he didn’t think the boy could have been fishing the Spey or he’d have seen him. So we still haven’t a clue as to where he may have gone.’

Ginger wasn’t lying. This was as much as he knew, for it was at this point in Biggles’s conversation with the water bailiff that he had spotted Cornelli and left the party to follow him. This was before anything had been said about Major Grey fishing the Tromie and the possibility of Carlo being with him. As far as this particular tributary was concerned he was in complete ignorance. Indeed, he was unaware of the existence of a river called the Tromie.

Cornelli, who had paused, presumably to digest the unwelcome news Ginger had given him, went on: ‘How does dis guy know de boy don’t fish de Spey no more?’

‘He should know. He’s an official employed to guard the river against poachers so he’s up and down it all day.’

This final piece of information seemed to take the remaining wind out of Cornelli’s sails. He looked worried, nonplussed, as he had every reason to be. Ginger might have lost his life by smiling at the gangster’s discomfiture. Cornelli, his eyes glinting and his thin lips drawn tightly over his teeth, whipped up his gun. ‘What’s so funny?’ he spat. At that moment he looked what he was, a killer.

Ginger’s smile faded. ‘Sorry,’ he said, contritely. ‘But it just struck me that this business has a comical slide. While we stand here arguing the Viper will be looking for the boy. You know what he’ll do if he finds him?’

‘Bump him off.’

‘Is that what you’d do?’

‘Sure. De brat donta go back to his pappa after what de old man done to me.’

Ginger shook his head, slowly. ‘You’re not so smart. The Viper kill him? Not likely. Why should he? That boy’s worth a million dollars, and as you know, and as the Viper knows, his father’s in London with the money.’

‘Pah! Donta give me dat,’ sneered Cornelli. ‘How could de Viper know de old man’s in London?’

‘Don’t fool yourself. How do you suppose the Viper knew you were at the Grosvenor when he called to see you there?’

‘How? You tell me.’

‘The old man told him. He said he had an appointment with you that same evening.’

Cornelli looked incredulous. 'Why would de old man tell him dat?'

'He couldn't help himself. The Viper used the same argument as you do — a gun.'

'So dat was it,' breathed Cornelli. 'You sure know plenty.'

'Now you get wise,' went on Ginger. 'If the Viper gets his hands on the boy he'll hold him for ransom and you'll have come a long way for nothing — that is, if you don't run into him and get bumped off yourself.'

Cornelli considered the matter, regarding Ginger with calculating malice.

Ginger, having no weapon, had for some time been thinking fast. What Cornelli intended to do with him at the close of this conversation he did not know, but he was not so optimistic as to suppose he would be allowed to walk away to rejoin the others and continue the search for the missing boy. He knew too much. He might see the Viper and tell him where to find Cornelli.

A few yards farther on the wood ended abruptly at the lip of a steep brae which, falling almost down to the river, like so many banks in the Highlands, was covered with a dense growth of gorse, broom, bracken and a tangle of brambles. It was ready-made for murder. In such a jungle a body could lie for months or even years without being discovered. Cornelli had glanced at it several times and the significance of this had not been lost on Ginger who, as his alarm mounted, became increasingly determined to take any chance of escape rather than submit to what he suspected Cornelli had in mind. After all, he reasoned, if this assumption was correct he had nothing to lose and everything to gain by making a break.

The chance came when Cornelli went on: 'You seen the Viper since you came here?'

'Here he comes now,' answered Ginger, casually, looking over Cornelli's shoulder into the wood beyond.

The trick worked. Cornelli spun round to look.

Ginger jumped forward, and grabbing the arm of the hand that held the gun twisted it with a force that might have broken it. He hoped, of course, that Cornelli would drop the gun. That was the intention, but it failed. Cornelli, caught off-balance, fell, the gun exploding as he went down and the bullet kicking up pine needles between Ginger's feet. Cornelli fell on his back. Ginger, still hanging on to the gun arm, fell on him, his knees on his stomach. This produced a grunt, but Cornelli still held the gun in spite of all Ginger could do to make him open his hand.

Writhing like a snake Cornelli strove to get up, but Ginger fought just as desperately to prevent it, aware that his life depended on keeping the arm down. Holding the gun against the ground with one hand he drove the fist of the other into Cornelli's face and followed this by using both hands to twist Cornelli's wrist. This must have hurt, for it produced a cry. But it did the trick. Cornelli's fingers opened and the gun fell out of them. Ginger snatched it up as he jumped clear.

Breathing heavily he turned to face his opponent who had lost no time in

getting to his feet. 'Now I'll do the talking,' he panted, trenchantly.

What, given time, he would have said, is a matter for conjecture, but at that moment a movement among the trees some distance behind Cornelli caught his eye. For a split second he stared unbelievably. Then he cried out, in a voice shrill with alarm. 'Look out! Here *is* the Viper.'

There must have been something in his voice or manner that told Cornelli this was the truth — as indeed it was. The gangster took one quick look and bolted, taking from his pocket as he ran a second pistol, which, as may be imagined, shook Ginger to no small extent, for this was a possibility that had not occurred to him. However, he did not stand still to consider what might have happened had not the Viper arrived on the scene. He, too, ran, taking a different route through the trees and presently swinging round to where he judged the lane to be. What was happening behind him he neither knew nor cared. His one idea was to get back to Biggles with all possible speed. He had no wish to become involved in a shooting match between Cornelli and his gangster associates whom he had betrayed.

As he ran he listened for shots, but heard none. Reaching the lane he put Cornelli's pistol in his pocket and ran on until he came to the first houses. Only then did he steady his pace, and straightening his disarranged clothes walked on quickly to the place from where he had started his extraordinary adventure. He found Biggles and the others still there, standing by the car.

Biggles did not exactly receive him with open arms. He stood with his arms folded across his chest, his forehead furrowed with a deep frown of annoyance. 'What the devil have you been doing?' he demanded angrily.

'Devil is the right word,' answered Ginger, still breathing deeply from his exertions, as he sank down on the running board of the car and mopped a sweaty face with his handkerchief.

'You realize you've kept us waiting here—'

'Don't think that was for fun,' broke in Ginger. 'I've been for a walk with Cornelli — with a gun stuck in my ribs.'

'*What!*' Biggles's expression changed in a flash to one of incredulity.

'Here's his gun — or one of his guns,' went on Ginger, producing the weapon.

'Well, stiffen the crows,' exclaimed Biggles. 'How did this happen?'

Ginger told his story, starting at the point where he had walked away to confirm that the man he had seen was Cornelli.

'We heard a shot but thought nothing of it,' said Eddie, at the finish.

'I was hoping it might you along. Have you seen Cornelli? He may have come this way.'

'No.'

'The last I saw of him he was in that wood, running for his life towards the river. What about the Viper?'

'We haven't seen him, either,' replied Biggles. 'What a kettle of fish! It looks as if there's going to be shooting before this daft game's played out.'

‘The question is, old boy, where do we step into it?’ put in Bertie, polishing his eyeglass thoughtfully.

‘Here’s that water bailiff coming back,’ observed Biggles. ‘He looks as if he’s going to speak to us. I wonder if he’s seen Major Grey or the boy, or picked up some news of them.’

The water-keeper came up. ‘Yon boy ye were asking after seems to be in great demand the day,’ he remarked, cheerfully.

‘How so?’

‘I was stopped up the river a wee bit by two other gentlemen who were looking for him.’

‘Was one of them short and dark, and the other tall?’ asked Biggles, quickly.

‘Aye. That would be them,’ agreed the bailiff.

‘Did you tell them you thought the lad was fishing with Major Grey up the Tromie?’

‘Aye. I hope ye find him.’ With a smile and a nod the Fishery Board Official walked on.

Biggles turned a serious face to the others. ‘It’s time we were getting up the Tromie,’ he said, grimly. ‘The Viper must have been on his way there when he cut through the wood. That’s the direction. I’ve had a look at the map.’

‘What about the car?’ queried Eddie.

‘We might as well use it for as far as it’ll take us,’ returned Biggles. ‘Then, I’m afraid, it’ll mean hoofing it. Keep your eyes open, everyone, for Cornelli or the Viper. They can’t be far away. It wouldn’t surprise me if they were watching us. Let’s go.’

CHAPTER 15



CHAPTER 15

THE RIVER TAKES A HAND

No difficulty was experienced in finding the confluence of the Spey and its tributary, the Tromie, and the car turned on to the track which began, and proceeded, towards the distant hills in wild but pleasant country, keeping in touch with the river without necessarily following its winding course. Nothing was seen of the gangsters.

What had been said about the track, which was no more than an accommodation road to the sporting lodge on the river bank, turned out to be only too true. It was in a terrible state with ruts deep enough to break the springs of the car, for which reason Biggles had to drive slowly and with care. Anyway, after about two miles progress was barred by a gate, which was locked, and bore the notice 'Private Road'.

Said Biggles, as he parked the car on the heather beside the track: 'This is where we start walking.'

'And this, too, is where we get our shirts wet, old boy, if I'm any judge of weather,' observed Bertie with some misgivings. He was eyeing an ominous, anvil-shaped cloud coming up against the breeze.

'Thunderstorm,' said Biggles, carelessly, little supposing that this was to play a part in their affairs. 'Let's go over to the river. We might as well follow

it. If the boy's out fishing he might be sitting down, in which case we wouldn't see him unless we were close.'

The Tromie, a typical Highland river, made a delightful picture as it wandered along its ancient bed from its source in the Cairngorms, towering high into the eastern sky. The country was fairly open, the herbage consisting almost entirely of undulating heather for as far as the eye could see; but there was also a fair amount of natural timber, mostly pine and silver birch with water-loving alders often lining the banks of the river. This was not very wide, varying between fifteen and thirty yards according to the confines of its bed. Sometimes it ran smoothly, although always fast, over a gravel bottom, but more often there were places where, flecked with foam, it had to fight its way through rocks and boulders. The water itself was wonderfully clear, which made it difficult to judge the depth. Ginger, knowing how misleading such rivers can be, suspected it was deeper than it appeared.

Generally speaking the scene was as charming a picture of rural solitude as could be imagined. Skylarks sang. Bees hummed in the warm sunshine. A few terns winged their way lazily, like large white swallows, up and down the stream in their eternal quest for the small fish which formed their food. They took no notice of the intruders. Once in a while a flash of silver revealed a salmon fighting its way upstream to the spawning grounds.

But Biggles was evidently not concerned with fish, or the scenery, for he complained about the increasing amount of timber which restricted their view. They were, of course, still watching for the Viper. The going also became more difficult, the ground uneven and the heather long with many rocks buried in it.

'We shall look a bunch of suckers if the kid isn't here after all,' muttered Eddie, as they sweated on.

'Don't worry, you'll get a shower bath presently,' promised Biggles, with an upward glance at the approaching storm.

For about an hour they went on, always watching the river banks in front of them for the boy, and the banks behind for the Viper, but by the end of that time, when the lodge appeared on the opposite bank ahead, half hidden by trees, they had not seen a soul.

Near the lodge the track reappeared, to cross the river with an old wooden bridge that did not look any too safe for a vehicle.

'This is where we might get news of Carlo,' said Biggles. 'Major Grey, if this is his place, may be out fishing, but there should be someone here.'

They crossed the bridge, went to the front door and rang the bell. The door was opened by an elderly woman who looked as if she might be the housekeeper.

'Good morning. Is Major Grey staying here?' inquired Biggles.

'Aye.'

'Is he at home?'

'No. He's away to Grantown with my husband for the shopping.'

‘Has he a boy named Carlo staying here with him?’

‘Aye, but he’s awa’ up the river to the fishing.’

‘By himself?’

‘Aye. The Major and my mon, the gillie, will be joining him na doot when they come back.’

‘We’re very anxious to find Carlo. We have an urgent message for him. Could you give us an idea of where we might find him?’

‘On a day like this he’ll most likely be at the White Mare’s Tail.’

‘I take it that’s a pool.’

‘A long run of rocky rushes below the lynn.’

‘How far up the river is it?’

‘Aboot a mile, I’d say.’

‘And on which bank do you think he’d be fishing?’

‘The run fishes best from the far side. The deep water is on this side and the rocks are big and dangerous.’

‘Thank you. We’ll see if we can find him. I’m much obliged to you. If the Major comes back you might tell him we’ve only gone up the river to speak to Carlo.’

‘Surely. Guid day to ye.’

Biggles led the way back across the bridge. ‘Now at last we seem to be getting somewhere,’ he said in a voice of relief.

His confidence expired in an exclamation of annoyance when, about twenty minutes later, the noise of turbulent water which they had heard for some time, was explained, and there came into view the long reach of foaming white water that gave the run its name. Here the river, coming over the fall, hurled itself against a chaos of rock faces on the far side in a cloud of spray. Recoiling it raced on between more black rocks that stuck out of the water like giant teeth. It was an ideal place for salmon to rest behind the rocks while waiting to mount the fall. And the boy for whom they had sought so long was there.

He was on the opposite bank.

Poised on the obviously dangerous rocks, which in places rose sheer for five or six feet above the level of the water, he was leaning back on a rod that was bent like a bow, with the point jerking.

‘Would you believe it?’ muttered Biggles, bitterly. ‘There he is and we can’t get to him.’

They all hurried on, for the place where the boy was standing was a good hundred yards above them.

‘It’s him all right,’ declared Eddie.

‘And it looks as if he’s stuck in a fish,’ put in Bertie, as there came the scream of a reel above the noise of the water.

Carlo, following his fish which was now running downstream, came nearer. Intent on what he was doing, as indeed he had to be, he took not the slightest notice of them. His face was pale and his lips were parted in

excitement. His eyes were on the water at the point where the line entered it. His task was not made any easier by a long-handled gaff that swung loosely from a belt round his waist.

‘He must be out of his mind,’ said Biggles, as they came opposite, with the boiling water between them.

At that moment, as if things were not difficult enough, with a shattering clap of thunder the storm broke, and the rain came down like ramrods. Visibility was practically blotted out, although the boy, not more than twenty yards away, could still just be discerned like a vague grey shadow. He was still fighting his fish and had no eyes for anything else.

‘Carlo!’ yelled Biggles.

The boy took no notice.

‘Carlo, listen,’ shouted Biggles, with his hands cupped round his mouth.

The boy must have heard him, for he shouted back: ‘Go away. What are you trying to do — make me lose my fish?’ He slipped and nearly fell.

‘It’s no use,’ said Biggles, helplessly, already drenched and with water pouring off him. ‘He’ll neither look nor listen till he kills that fish — if the fish doesn’t kill him. We shall have to go back to the bridge to get to the other side. There’s no question of trying to get across any other way. Look at the water.’

Already discoloured as a hundred peaty rivulets discharged storm water into it the river was rising. Its note became more shrill. The foam that had been white was now the colour of the froth on stout.

‘There may be shallows just above the fall,’ suggested Ginger. ‘Shall I go and look?’

‘Please yourself but don’t take any chances. It isn’t the depth of the water that matters. It’s the force of it. If you fell you’d never get on your feet again.’

‘I’ll go with him,’ offered Bertie.

They hurried off, leaving Biggles and Eddie watching the boy who, unmindful of their presence, continued to play his fish, which was taking him steadily downstream as it tired and went with the current. They could now see him clearly, for already the force of the storm had been spent and the rain had dwindled to a drizzle. But the mischief had been done, and the river was in roaring spate.

‘They’ll never get across while she’s like this,’ Biggles told Eddie. ‘We were mad to think they might.’

‘How long will it take to go down?’

‘Not long, perhaps, but too long for us to stand here doing nothing. We might as well have started for the bridge straightaway. That’s the only thing to do. But we’d better wait for the others.’ In spite of himself Biggles was taking an interest in Carlo’s battle with the fish, obviously a heavy one. He made no attempt to speak to him, realizing that it would be futile to attempt to explain a situation that would have been difficult in the best of circumstances. The noise of the water would probably make conversation impossible, anyway.

Presently Ginger and Bertie could be seen coming back.

‘No use,’ said Ginger, laconically, as he ran up.

‘Let’s go down to the bridge,’ decided Biggles.

They started, but they had gone less than a hundred yards when Ginger, looking down the river, cried out: ‘Here comes the Viper.’

Biggles stopped. It was true. Striding up the river bank came the Viper and his associate. They were on the other side; that is, the same side of the river as Carlo.

For a moment Eddie, in his desperation, looked as if he would jump into the river, regardless; but he thought better of it. ‘What can we do?’ he said, in an agonized voice. ‘It’ll take us half an hour to go round by the bridge.’

They looked back at Carlo. Still coming downstream he was only fifty yards away, but he might as well have been fifty miles for all the hope there was of getting to him. He was now on the last of the rocks, and having brought the exhausted fish close in immediately below him was trying vainly to reach it with the gaff. Then, even as they watched, what Ginger had half expected all along, happened. He slipped on the wet rock. His legs flew from under him and he went headlong in the water on top of the fish. In an instant he was being swept down the river.

Biggles ran to the water’s edge and started in, apparently in a wild hope of intercepting the boy, now whirling down the middle of the stream fending himself off, and sometimes clutching at, the rocks as he came to them. It was all to no purpose. Biggles himself was nearly carried off his feet as Carlo was swept past him.

All they could do now was run along the bank keeping level with the boy, but even this was not easy. Carlo’s head was above water, which answered Biggles’ mental question about his ability to swim; and that he could see them was plain, for he was making desperate efforts to reach the bank they were on. Biggles, on his part, was tearing along looking for a place where there would be a reasonable chance of getting out to the boy. Twice he went in, the others hanging on to him by linking hands; but each time the boy was swept past out of reach by the swirling water.

Ginger was trying to watch the Viper at the same time. They had drawn level with him and he and his companion, Mack, were keeping pace along the opposite bank watching the proceedings. They made no attempt to interfere, apparently seeing no purpose in doing so. At such short range they could probably have shot the boy; or they could have shot those attempting to rescue him; but they left their guns in their pockets, still hoping, perhaps, to get the boy alive. He was obviously no use to them dead. Biggles, on his side, took no notice of them, accepting the truce forced upon both parties by the circumstances. Ginger was wondering what would happen if one side or the other succeeded in getting hold of the boy.

A fair-sized rock split the water in the middle of the river. A branch brought down by the spate had lodged across it. Carlo caught the branch and

hanging on to it reached the rock, to which he clung. This could not be more than a temporary relief. His face was chalk white and it was clear that he was near the end of his endurance.

‘It’s got to be now,’ said Biggles, tersely. ‘Stand by.’ He ran a little way upstream to allow for drift and plunging into the water struck out for the rock. He reached it, and grabbing the boy by the collar of his jacket kicked out in a back stroke for the shore. He was of course instantly carried downstream, but the others, anticipating this, had made a human chain with Eddie at the outer end. He managed to catch Biggles’s hand as he went past and in another minute they were carrying the boy up the bank where they laid him on the heather. He was unconscious.

‘Watch the Viper doesn’t try anything,’ said Biggles, as he applied artificial respiration.

‘He’s had a crack on the skull,’ observed Eddie, who had noticed a trickle of blood on Carlo’s face.

‘I’d say he’ll have several bruises from colliding with those rocks,’ said Biggles. ‘He’s lucky to be alive. If we hadn’t come along when we did he’d have had it.’

‘Look out,’ warned Ginger. ‘The Viper’s pulled his gun.’

‘Cover us, Eddie, while we get the boy out of sight,’ requested Biggles.

As Carlo was lifted and carried into a slight hollow beyond the top of the bank there came the crack of a pistol shot.

‘Who’s that shooting?’ asked Biggles, resuming work on Carlo.

Ginger answered: ‘The Viper.’

‘Is he shooting at us?’

Ginger hesitated. ‘He’s— No, by gosh, it’s Cornelli!’

‘So now we’re all here,’ returned Biggles, grimly.

CHAPTER 16

THE PAY-OFF

ACTUALLY, as things turned out, in his last remark Biggles was speaking a little before his time; the full muster was to come later; but he was correct in what he had in mind.

Meanwhile, Ginger, lying flat and peering through a fringe of heather at the opposite bank, witnessed a spectacle which by no stretch of the imagination could he have visualized in the Highlands of Scotland — a gun battle between rival American gangsters. Eddie watched too, gun in hand, ready to take part should it become necessary. It did not.

The affair did not last long. Cornelli was the first to fall, hit, or pretending to be hit, it was not clear which; for as the Viper hurried up to finish what he had begun Cornelli raised himself on an elbow and at close range shot him dead. At least, from the way the Viper went down Ginger had little doubt of this. Mack, standing behind a tree, then opened up on Cornelli, firing several shots. One must have found its mark for Cornelli did not move again. Mack then hurried away down the river and was soon lost to sight behind a line of alders.

‘That’s swell,’ asserted Eddie, cheerfully. ‘That’s the way I like to see the skunks go out.’

They turned to find that Carlo had recovered consciousness. At all events his eyes were open although he still looked dazed, as he had every reason to be.

Said Biggles: ‘Somehow we shall have to get him to hospital to check up that he hasn’t injured his inside by being banged against those rocks.’

‘What’s going on here? What’s all this shooting about?’ demanded a voice angrily.

It was Major Grey, who had come across the heather from behind. He carried a fishing rod. With him was his gillie, holding a gaff.

‘It’s a long story. I’ll tell you all about it later,’ answered Biggles, standing up. ‘The first thing is to get this boy to hospital.’

‘What’s the matter with him? Has he been shot?’

‘No. He fell in the river trying to gaff a fish.’

‘The young fool. I told him not to go near that run alone.’

‘He’s an American—’

‘I know that.’

‘But you may not know he’d been kidnapped by the man who pretended to be his father. The shooting you heard was pistol shots as he and some other gangsters fought on the far bank. I think there are some casualties, but I’m not concerned with them at the moment. I’m afraid this lad has been hurt by being thrown against the rocks. Where’s the nearest hospital? We ought to get him

there. My name by the way is Bigglesworth. I'm a police officer from Scotland Yard. Here with me is Mr Ross of the United States police.'

'Good Lord!' The Major grasped the situation instantly. 'I'll go and fetch my car. We'll take the boy to Grantown. My man will help you to get him across to the track. It isn't far.' He hurried off towards the Lodge.

Carlo was carried carefully to the road. After a little while the Rolls appeared. The boy was lifted into it. Eddie got in with him, and so, at Biggles's request, did Bertie, to bring their own car along to the Lodge when the gate was unlocked. Biggles said he and Ginger would meet it there. Meanwhile, they would cross the bridge to find out what had happened on the far side of the river. This being arranged the car went off, and Biggles, with Ginger and the gillie, hurried up the river to ascertain the condition of the gangsters.

They found them both lying in the heather where they had fallen. Cornelli was dead, and the Viper breathed his last soon afterwards as they knelt beside him.

'Well, that's it,' said Biggles, philosophically, as he got up. 'What fools some men are. These two came all this way to shoot each other. Well, I suppose they asked for what they've got. They'll have to stay here for the moment. I'll get in touch with the local police. They can take care of this. Let's get back to the Lodge. Keep your eyes open for Mack. I imagine what has happened has taken the sting out of him and he'll be on his way home.'

'He managed to get a gun from somewhere,' observed Ginger.

'Crooks seem always able to get guns.'

They saw no sign of Mack on the return journey to the Lodge, where they found Bertie waiting with the car. Standing talking to him was the water bailiff who, as he admitted, had thought there was something strange about their behaviour and had come along to see what was going on. Bertie had already given him a broad outline of the facts. He was offered a lift as far as the main road, which he accepted, and left them saying he would contact the local police constable.

Biggles, Ginger and Bertie, went on to Grantown, where they found the Rolls, with Major Grey and Eddie beside it, standing outside the hospital.

'How's the boy?' inquired Biggles, as he joined them.

Eddie answered. 'Not too bad. He's got some nasty bruises with slight concussion, but the doctor says he's suffering chiefly from shock. He'll be okay.'

'Have you told him anything?'

'Not yet. The doctor said better not. But I've rung up his pop in London and told him what has happened. He's coming up. Said he'd try to charter a plane, if possible a 'copter, to drop him off as close as possible.'

'I shall have to have a word with my chief and tell him it's all over bar the tidying up,' said Biggles. 'He can tell Gaskin.'

Major Grey went on: 'Of course I hadn't the remotest idea of who the boy

was. I saw him on the road when I was on my way to Inverness to get some tackle and asked him if he wanted a lift. It ended with him coming with me. He told me his father was away — at least, he said it was his father. Finding him a nice, well-mannered sort of lad, I asked him if he'd care to cast a fly on the Tromie for a day or two with me until his father came back. That was how he came to be with me, and that, really, is all I know about it.'

'Lucky for him,' said Biggles, seriously. 'Your Rolls gave us the clue we needed.'

'But you fellows must have got pretty wet,' continued Major Grey, looking them up and down. 'I suppose you wouldn't like to come back with me to dry off?'

'Thanks all the same, but running about in the sun since the storm has got us fairly dry, I think. In any case I must be getting back to London.'

'Then if it's all the same to you I'll be getting back to my fishing. If you'd care for a day on the river any time look me up.'

'That's very generous of you. We'll remember it.'

The Major got back in his car and drove off, and that was the last they saw of him.

As a matter of detail Biggles and his friends stayed in Grantown until Mr Salvatore arrived, when over a meal at his invitation they told him the whole story. He had by then seen his son, who was nearly back to normal but had been advised to stay in hospital for a day or two until it was certain there would be no complications arising from the shock he had suffered.

Mr Salvatore was naturally profuse in his thanks. In fact, he was almost overcome, having given his son up for lost. 'I don't know how to repay you,' he said. 'If there is anything I can do for you now or at any time you have only to name it.' He smiled sadly. 'As you may know, I have the misfortune to be a rich man: I say misfortune because all my money has brought me has been anxiety and grief.'

Biggles smiled. 'And your son has the misfortune to be a poor little rich boy. We are amply rewarded by being able to return him to you.'

Mr Salvatore looked at Eddie. 'In America I am not without influence, and when I get home my first business will be to see that you get the credit for what you have done.'

Eddie jerked a thumb at Biggles. 'Here's the man who deserves the credit,' he asserted generously. 'Without him and the British police I'd have got nowhere.'

Biggles rose. 'Now I really must be getting back to London, where I'm more likely to get kicks than ha'pence from my chief for being away for so long. The car will have to go back to Inverness, after which I shall press straight on to Dalcross and fly down. Ginger can take the Auster. Are you coming with us, Eddie, or are you staying here?'

'I'll come with you,' decided Eddie. 'My boss will want to know what's happening, too.'

And that is how it all ended. It only remains to be said that Mack was picked up a few days later and taken to gaol to await extradition to the United States on several charges, one of which was murder in the first degree, as Eddie would bear witness.

THE END